Representation of Breton identity: the Pont-Aven School, 1886-1894

Representation of Breton Identity

The Pont-Aven School 1886-1894

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Certificate of Originality

I certify that I am responsible for the work submitted in this thesis, that the original work is my own except as specified in acknowledgements or in references, and that neither the thesis nor the original work contained therein has been submitted to this or any other institutions for a higher degree.

Dean Andrew Musson, September 1996.

Abstract

This study analyses the paintings produced by Paul Gauguin, and the Pont-Aven School, of Brittany. The paintings are examined as texts, with consideration of their literal and symbolic representations, in the context of the artists, their critics, and their intended audiences' social, cultural and economic backgrounds.

Three main themes of representation are considered; Breton landscapes, representations of Breton peasantry, and representations of Breton Catholicism. The modes of representation of Garden, Wilderness, and the Picturesque, are considered in relation to landscapes. The consumption of Brittany through art, tourism, literature, and ethnography are considered, with regards to the peasantry. The themes of Catholicism as spectacle, rural society as pious, and rural society as "Other", are considered in the chapter on Catholicism.

It is contended that the Pont-Aven School represented Brittany in terms of their bourgeois, intellectual, and metropolitan French background. It is argued that, despite the radical and new Post-Impressionist style that the School developed, the content of their paintings constituted a continuation of the modes of representations of more conventional and academically accepted artists.

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Introduction

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril...All art is quite useless.

Oscar Wilde, 1891[1]

All Art Is Quite Useless

This study is concerned with the work of the Pont-Aven School, a group of artists, most notable of whom was Paul Gauguin [Plate 1], working in the Breton village of Pont-Aven towards the end of the nineteenth-century.

This study examines the 'texts' produced by these painters, to attempt to gain insight into the cultural and historical geography of nineteenth-century Brittany. The context in which the Pont-Aven School operated will also be considered. This study examines, inter alia, the benefits and drawbacks of the use of texts as a tool in cultural and historical geography.

Surface And Symbol

Texts have been used as a tool in cultural geography for a number of years, as a device by which evidence may be gleaned about the society in which the text was produced. The term text refers to any cultural artefact, for example novels, paintings or sculptures.

A potential difficulty occurs if the text is considered in isolation. Certain geographers, for example Duncan, would argue that there is not an absolute reality within which the text is rooted, rather that the text forms part of an overall discourse.[2] In order to be able to analyse the text, it is therefore necessary to form part of this discourse, or at least be able to interpret it. That is, in analysing the texts, one must be aware of the ideological and symbolic significance of their



Plate 1: Paul Gauguin at Pont-Aven, 1888.

constituent parts, what is being communicated, and to whom the message is directed.

The importance of context, however, must not be lost in the use of the concept of text. It would be too blinkered and restricting to view landscape solely in terms of metaphor.[3] As Felix Driver observes;

> *There are those inspired by the models of post-structuralism literary theory who would abandon altogether the attempt to correlate texts with some non-textual reality. (This) commonly attracts the criticism that by confining itself within the bounds of textuality, it creates its own version of internal functionalism*[4]

In considering society, we are faced with a human creation, just as we are with landscape. Michel Foucault maintained that social reality is constituted in and through historically specific languages and forms of knowledge. Discourse, which may be seen as a coherent pattern of statements across a range of sources that sets the terms of operation of truth and power in any field of knowledge, is rooted in material practices, and therefore has to be examined in terms of systematic relations.[5]

Green argues that traditional art history becomes entrapped in a circular argument, which takes a painting as a text and relates it to historical structures, without any supporting intertextual evidence. In support of Foucault's position, and in contrast to the practices adopted by traditional art history, Green argues that the painting needs to be placed very firmly in the context of the time, by referring it to its contemporary audience, criticism, and other related contemporaneous processes.[6]

This study will explore the vital importance of relating the texts produced by the Pont-Aven School, to the context in which they were created. This provides a useful insight into the reliability of texts as a source of geographical evidence.

Beneath The Surface

The texts analysed in this study are paintings.[7] This is arguably the most often used type of text in this style of cultural geography. In considering the paintings in themselves, the analysis may be undertaken on two levels. On a superficial level, the painting may be viewed for what it literally represents.

Perhaps more value can be derived, however, from considering the symbolism contained in each painting. A way of decoding this symbolism, Daniels and Cosgrove contend, is by the use of iconography.[8] This looks past simple symbolic representation, in which an icon is used as a symbol for an object, and must consider symbolic values. In this analysis, symbols are not

> *merely figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion or allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces, each of which produces and posits a world of its own.*[9]

An interesting aspect of considering the work of the Pont-Aven School is that their work is not naturalistic, and is Modern in style. Modernist scholars might argue that it is not valid to try and interpret the symbolism of such paintings.

Modernists believe that the viewing of art is an aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience is disinterested, that is unaffected by dispositions, desires, needs, or any other subjective considerations. According to this view, to understand art you just have to look at it. Artists represent emotions or feelings, evoked to the spectator through visual experience. This is determined by the shapes and surfaces of a

composition, rather than what they represent. The whole Modernist perspective attempts to prise art away from the need for literary justification:-

> *To understand art we need know nothing whatever about history.... To appreciate fully a work of art we require nothing but sensibility. To those that can hear Art speaks for itself.*[10]

Within Modernist theory, modern art is seen as atheoretical in its development, developed in accordance with the practice of individual artists. This implies that criticism is dependent on the art that it discusses.

It is the contention of this study, however, that the work of the Pont-Aven School was informed by, and indeed was consciously aware of other cultural references, be they classical, medieval, or from non-Western cultures.[11] Both the art and criticism may be seen as forming part of a discourse, which is characterised by knowledge and ideology. This view sees both artist, critic, and for that matter the consumer as part of a community which communicates amongst itself through a shared system of symbols, references and ideas. This shared system may be argued to be constructed through the criticism that the art generates. To fully understand a work of art, it is necessary to be able to understand this means of communication. The work of art becomes dependent on this communication in order to be fully understood.

There are a number of potential dangers with trying to analyse the symbolism in a body of paintings. Amongst them is that in analysing paintings as a text, symbolism intended by the artist is missed, or misinterpreted. Equally, of course, symbolic meaning can be imposed by the observer, where none was intended by the artist.

In terms of this study, however, the danger of this has been reduced by the fact that Paul Gauguin wrote at great length on his work, its symbolism, and what he was

aiming to achieve. It is this correspondence that highlights how aware Gauguin was of the cultural references that the Pont-Aven School drew on.

Placing The Texts In Context

In order to try and analyse the paintings produced by the Pont-Aven School as texts they must be placed in the context in which they were produced. This context is constructed of and informed by a number of different strands. Amongst these elements is the form of the society in which the paintings were produced, the development of artistic styles and subjects which informed the work of the Pont-Aven School, and, equally important, the intellectual, social, and political background of the artists, their critics, and their intended audience.

Salon painters who portrayed Brittany, at the same time as the Pont-Aven School, portrayed peasant scenes in a realist manner, to the point that their paintings resembled photographs.[12] Amongst them was Dagnan-Bouveret, who paid close attention to the details of costume in his paintings of Brittany. He concentrated, in large measure, on the religious festivities of the Breton peninsula.

The critic Paul Mantz noted that Dagnan-Bouveret's paintings possess a kind of archaic simplicity by which he links the Breton peasants more to the past than the present. What Dagnan-Bouveret may be seen as trying to achieve was to record, and therefore to preserve, what he perceived, and what his metropolitan audience perceived as traditional Breton society.

Such Salon painters usually possessed a bourgeois and metropolitan background. Their audience, on the whole, were from similar social groups. Nearly every member of the Pont-Aven School shared a comparable background. Gauguin's was a private collector, whilst following a moderately successful career on the Bourse.[13] He would, therefore, have been aware of academic paintings conventions of representation, even if he consciously claimed to reject them in his own work.

Other members of the Pont-Aven School had received a formal education in art, and would have been similarly informed.[14]

The Post-Impressionist painters of the Pont-Aven School therefore chose a subject that was felt to typify the values of traditional France, on which to practice their radical new styles. Catherine Bertho maintains that France's provinces did not develop their own identities in the popular imagination, until after the Revolution when they ceased to be political units.[15] According to this analysis the stereotypes that developed from this point were complex, and often contradictory. For Brittany, the land was characterised as either sinister or bucolic, the costume as bizarre or picturesque, the people as wild or pious. For Bertho, Brittany came to stand for the essence of rural France. When rural France was seen as being wild, Brittany was seen as being the wildest. Equally, when rural France was seen as being Catholic, Brittany was seen as being the most Catholic. The fact that such subjects were unquestioningly adopted probably owes much to the Pont-Aven School's similarity to the Salon painters who represented the Province at the same time.

Another perspective may be adopted on Gauguin's perspective on painting the Breton peasantry. Gauguin's stays in Brittany, Martinique and Tahiti were, he claimed, due to his distaste of the corrupt values of Western urban society, and his belief in the existence of an untainted 'primitive' idyll.[16] Thomson argues that he painted the Breton peasantry largely as a means by which he could validate these beliefs. In 1888 Gauguin declared himself at home in Brittany, and claimed to identify with the peasant's religious imagery and customs, and their honest 'primitive' way of life, although Thomson contends that this was a stance designed to distance himself from artists, such as Seurat, who painted scene of suburban Parisian life.[17]

In 1888 Gauguin set himself the following task;

> *Whilst in Brittany, where I've already been, I'm going to devote 7-8 months to studying the character of local people - an essential ingredient for good painting.*[18]

It is a mute point as to whether the Pont-Aven School truly did absorb the Breton character. In reality, Gauguin, and the Pont-Aven School were never really more than visitors to Brittany.[19]

Brittany's emergence as a tourist centre maintained the Province's popularity amongst artists, towards the end of the nineteenth-century. Pont-Aven [Plate 2] was particularly popular amongst artists, both from France and abroad. As Gauguin observed;

> *If you imagine it's too isolated - you're wrong! Painters come here in winter and in summer, English, American etc...If I manage to secure a regular, secure income from selling my paintings, I'll come and live here all year round.*[20]

Gauguin feigned indifference to the reviews that his work received, and he claimed to hold the whole critical process in contempt;

> *This work is to my taste and done exactly as I would have conceived it.' There you have the whole of art criticism....Yes, gentlemen of letters, you are incapable of criticizing a work of art, even a book, because you are already corrupted as judges. You have a preconceived idea, that of a littérateur, and you are too imbued with your own importance to look at somebody else's thinking...To judge a book, you must be intelligent and well educated. To judge painting*

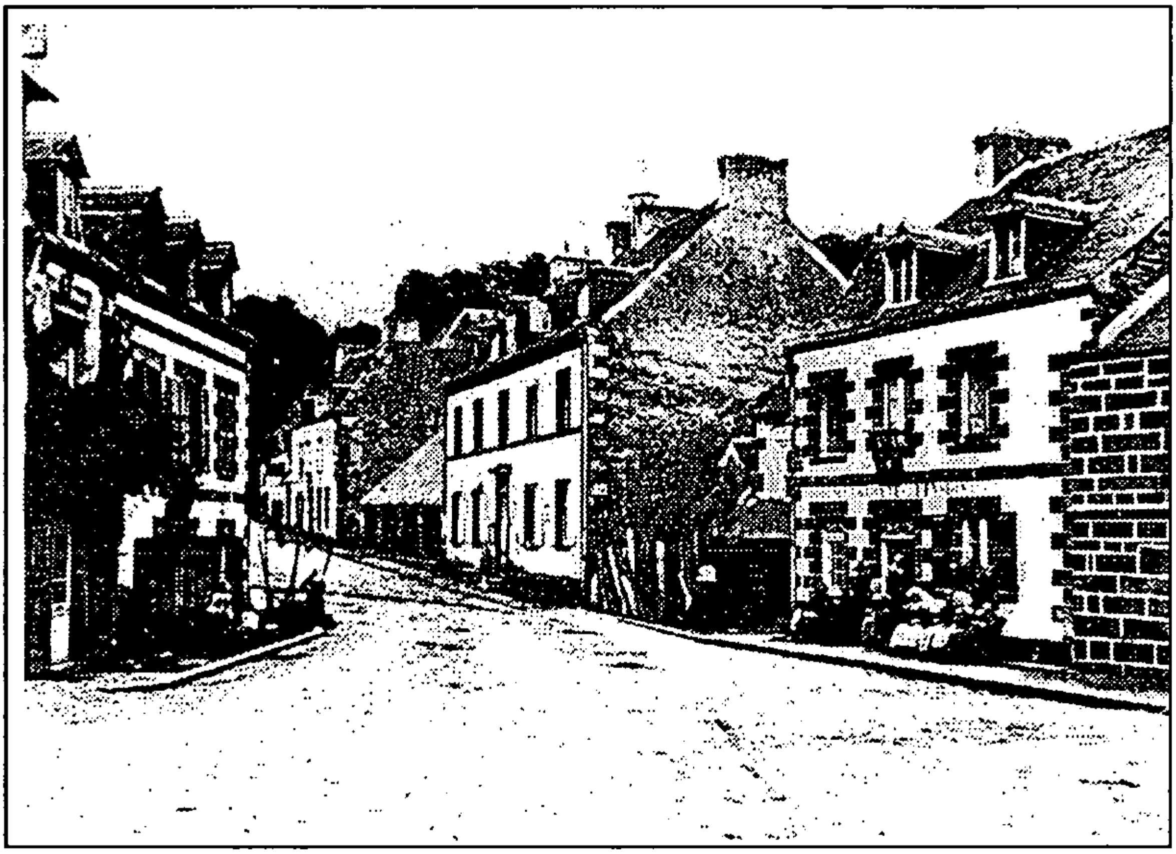


Plate 2: The Square at Pont-Aven, c.1876

> *and music, you need - in addition to possessing intelligence and artistic knowledge - special feelings which are not in everyone's nature.*[21]

Yet Gauguin's correspondence reveals that he was constantly asking friends in Paris for newspaper cuttings of the critics' response to his work, and that he often took adverse criticism to heart;

> *As for me, of all my efforts this year, nothing remains but howls from Paris which penetrate here and discourage me to such a degree that I dare not paint any more, and can only drag my old body about on the seashore of Le Pouldu in the bleak North wind.... I am making efforts to obtain some kind of a post in Tonkin, where I might be able to work as peacefully as I wish.*[22]

Despite developing a radically new style, the paintings Gauguin produced were still largely aimed at a bourgeois audience. Gauguin's interest in the notices which his exhibitions received, was not entirely due to an artist's vanity, but also due to the fact that the art critics were an important source of information on what and what not to buy, for the art-buying bourgeoisie of Paris. Gauguin and Bernard produced a catalogue of lithographs for sale at the *Café Volpini Exhibition* of 1889, with the expressed intention of making a profit, and of generating interest in their canvasses.[23] Gauguin was not beneath considering the commercial potential of his work.

Indeed, the majority of his letters to his dealer, Theo van Gogh, are on the subject of the price Gauguin's canvasses were fetching.[24] Gauguin's willingness to pander to this clientele may be illustrated by his repainting of the hand of one of the figures in *Breton Girls Dancing*, to please a potential buyer. Whilst portraying contempt for the process, Gauguin recognised the importance of creating a market for his

work. In a letter to Émile Bernard, written from Pont-Aven in October 1888, he wrote;

> *[Theo] van Gogh hopes to sell all my paintings....new subjects always have to be found for the public, that stupid buyer....I am as satisfied as possible with the results of my studies at Pont-Aven. Degas is supposed to buy the study for* Deux Bretonnes aux Avins *from me. This is the utmost flattery for me; as you know, I have the greatest faith in Degas's judgement. Moreover, commercially speaking, this is a very good starting point. All Degas's friends have faith in him/her.*[25]

The images that the Pont-Aven School created of Brittany may be divided into three main themes; images of Breton landscape, images of Breton peasantry, and images of Breton Catholicism. The next three chapters will be concerned with considering these areas of representation, and discussing the context within which they were produced.

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[1] From the preface, Wilde, O.F. (1891) The Picture of Dorian Gray. (This edition Wordsworth Press (Ware, Hertfordshire.), 1991).

[2] Duncan, J.S. (1990) The City as Text. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge).

[3] A classic example of a morphological approach to cultural geography is contained within Sauer, C.O. (1925) "The Morphology of Landscape." University of California Publications in Geography 2, pp.19-54. Reprinted in Land and Life (1969) University of California Press (Berkeley).

[4] Driver, F. (1992) "Geography's empire; histories of knowledge." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space. 10 pp.23-40, p.23.

[5] Green, N. (1990) The Spectacle of Nature. Manchester University Press (Manchester), p.3.

[6] Green The Spectacle of Nature, p3.

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[7] Other examples of the use of paintings as texts in Cultural Geography are included in Cosgrove, D. and Daniels, S. [eds.] (1988) The Iconography of Landscape. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge);and Heffernan, M.J. (1993) "Representing the Other: Europeans and the Oriental City." Recherches Urbaines dans le Monde Arabo-Musulman. 24, pp.78-95.

[8] See Cosgrove and Daniels, The Iconography of Landscape. p.2-4.

[9] Daniels, S. and Cosgrove, D. (1988) "Introduction: iconography and landscape." Chapter one in Cosgrove and Daniels The Iconography of Landscape p.2.

[10] Bell, C. (1913) Art. p.98 Quoted in Harrison, C. (1983) Modernism, Problems and Methods. The Open University Press (Milton Keynes), p.7.

[11] The critic Albert Aurier made perhaps the most definitive summary of the purpose and the nature of the synthetist style that had been developed at Pont-Aven, in the article *Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin*, published in *Mercure de France* in March 1891;

The normal and final goal of painting, as of all the arts, cannot be a direct presentation of objects. Its ultimate aim is to express ideas by translating them into a special language. To the eyes of the artist objects are meaningless as objects. They can only appear to him as signs. The artist has an obligation to avoid that antithesis of all art: concrete truth, illusionism, trompe l'œil, so as not to give by his pictures that false impression of nature which would act on the spectator just as nature itself. The strict duty of the ideological painter is therefore to make a rational choice among the multiple elements which exist in objective reality, and to use in his work only the general and individual lines, forms and colours which serve to express the ideological significance of the general symbol. The artist will also have the right -an obvious deduction- to exaggerate, to attenuate, to deform those directly significant elements of form, line and colour, not only according to his individual vision, but also to make any deformations needed to express the Idea.

Thus to sum up, the work of art, as I have chosen to evoke it logically will be:

1). Ideological, because its sole ideal is the expression of the Idea.

2). Symbolist, because it expresses the Idea through forms.

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3). Synthetic, because it presents these forms, these signs in such a way that they can be generally understood.

4). Subjective, because the object presented is considered not merely as an object, but as the sign of an idea suggested by the subject.

5). (And therefore) Decorative, since truly decorative painting as conceived by the Egyptians and probably by the Greeks and the primitives, is nothing but a manifestation of art which is at the same time subjective and synthetic.

Quoted on p.144 of Denvir, B. (1992) Post-Impressionism. Thames and Hudson (London).

This article illustrates that there was awareness of how the Pont-Aven School's work represented a particular ideology, and that the School distorted its representations to fit in with this.

[12] The Paris Salon was the established forum in which academically trained artists displayed their work to the public. Strict criteria were employed by the Salon judges, when accepting work. If a work did not conform to the precepts taught in French art schools, and did not stick to accepted genres of representation, then it was unlikely that it would be accepted. Towards the end of the nineteenth-century, the power of the Salon began to wane, as more artists challenged the orthodoxies of painting. Eventually the Salon was forced to accept the paintings of the Impressionists, and of the Post-Impressionists. Denvir, Post-Impressionism, p19.

[13] Gauguin made a comfortable living at the Bourse, and this allowed him to finance an interest in Impressionism leading him to buy pictures by Renoir, Monet, Cézanne, and Pissarro. This interest led him to start painting himself, and, by 1880, his efforts were rewarded when he was invited to exhibit at the fifth exhibition held by the Impressionists. He was at this time what could perhaps best be described as a Sunday painter, heavily influenced by the works he collected, and by Pissarro, who befriended Gauguin, and gave him instruction in painting. p.33, Cognait, R. (1963) Gauguin. Harry N. Abrams (New York).

The influence of the Impressionists may be seen in Gauguin's early paintings of Brittany. He was particularly influenced by Degas and Cézanne, as he confessed in a letter to Pissarro;

Has Cézanne found the exact formula for producing what is unanimously perceived to be a work of art? If he found the recipe to compress the exaggerated expression of all his feelings in one simple procedure, I beg of you: try to make him talk in his sleep by giving him one of these

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mysterious and homeopathic drugs and come to Paris as soon as possible to share your findings with me.

Letter to Camille Pissarro (Paris, July 1881) Merhlès, V. [ed.] (1984) Correspondence de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888. Editions Signac (Paris).

[14] Gauguin's background, for instance, was working on the Paris stock exchange, the Bourse. Many of the other members of the Pont-Aven School, eg Sérusier and Denis, attended respected establishment art schools such as the *Academie Saint-Julien.* p.33, Cognait, Gauguin,.

[15] Bertho, C. (1980) "L'invention de la Bretagne genese sociale d'un stéréotype." Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales. No.35, pp.45-63.

[16] Thomson, B. (1983) The Post-Impressionists. Phaidon Press Ltd. (London), p.104.

[17] Thomson The Post-Impressionists, p.132.

[18] To Mette Gauguin (Paris 22nd January - 6th February 1888), in Merlhès, Correspondence de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888.

[19] Thomson The Post-Impressionists., p.100.

[20] Letter to Mette Gauguin (Vers 25th July 1886) from Merhlès, Correspondence de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888.

[21] Taken from Notes Synthétiques (1884-5), written by Gauguin, and reproduced in; Guérin, D. [ed] (1978) The Writings of a Savage: Paul Gauguin. The Viking Press (New York).

[22] Letter to Émile Bernard (undated, Le Pouldu, November 1889), from Malingue, M.[ed.] (1948) Paul Gauguin: Letters to his Wife and Friends. Saturn Press (London).

[23] It seems that the prints produced were intended as a prospectus of the two artists' work, but may also be seen as a wider reaction against mass production amongst artists of the time. Many in the Pont-Aven School produced such prints. The simplicity of the images produced owed more than a little to the *Images d'Epinal*, popular wood-cut prints which were widely circulated around

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France from the Middle Ages. Examples of *Images d'Epinal* are contained in: Arts Council of Great Britain (1974) French Popular Imagery: Five Centuries of Prints. Arts Council (London).

[24] Theo van Gogh, who had encountered Gauguin through his Martinique work in 1887, introduced Gauguin's work to the conservative clientele of the art dealers Goupil's. This lucrative outlet for Gauguin was curtailed by Theo van Gogh's nervous breakdown in 1890. Gauguin's financial dependence on van Gogh may be illustrated by the fact that he agreed to stay with his dealer's brother, Vincent, at Arles during the winter of 1888, in return for a modest pension. p.87 Thomson, B. (1987) Gauguin. Thames & Hudson (London).

[25] Letter to Émile Bernard (October 1888, Pont-Aven); from Guérin, The Writings of a savage.

Images of Breton Landscape

From the mid-nineteenth-century, according to Green, nature played a significant role in securing and maintaining bourgeois hegemony in France. The conception of nature was, in some degree, the corollary of metropolitanism. The rising importance of tourism, in the second half of the nineteenth-century, made nature, and particularly the picturesque, a spectacle to be consumed. This is in marked contrast to the classical themes of garden and wilderness that informed earlier perceptions of the countryside. These classical themes remained persuasive, and indeed were drawn upon by the new picturesque vision. This chapter deals with how these themes played themselves out in the Pont-Aven School's representations of Brittany.

Landscape As A Construct

Duncan contends that landscape is not a natural phenomenon, but rather is the result of human agency. Society uses landscape as a metaphor for itself, and as a way of reproducing itself, according to this perspective.[1] The work of Duncan is based on the premise that a landscape is an image, manufactured by a culture, as means by which to represent, structure, or symbolise its surroundings.[2]

Landscape is, for Duncan, a central element in a cultural system, an ordered assemblage of objects, a text, a signifying system through which a social order is communicated, and reproduced. The significance of landscape lies in how it looks to those that live in it, on a day to day basis, and to what importance they attach to it, and how their readings influence their view of the social order.[3] As Geertz has said, landscapes are "a story...(people) tell themselves about themselves."[4]

Duncan argues that cultural geography could be used to study the system of signification underlying the landscape. One way in which this story can be studied

Landscape is an excellent objectifier, according to this analysis, in that it has the ideological goal of making what is cultural appear natural. Duncan argues that our inability to read landscape as a cultural process makes it more effective as such.

Landscape as Pastoral

One conception of landscape that informed nineteenth-century bourgeois representations and conceptions of landscape were the classical ideas of wilderness and garden. These ideas were revived during the Enlightenment, which was a key factor in determining changing attitudes towards nature in France. Whereas, formerly, artists had been interested in the details of nature, and landscape gardeners had been intent on imposing geometry, signifying man's control over nature, the Enlightenment brought interest in the potential harmony between man and nature. The countryside began to be seen as a place of contemplation, with Rousseau linking religion with a cult of nature, and taking an interest in its psychology.[5]

Pastoral landscapes had been a feature of painting since the Renaissance, when they were used as backdrops to representations of Classical scenes. The pastoral landscape is placeless, reliant more on a sense of Arcadian values than actuality;

> *(With the pastoral) No matter whether the geographical location described is in the north or south, whether the season is summer or winter, or the time of day evening or dawn: the language will be the same - that same nonparticular, universal poetic diction....there is an important sense in which the pastoral tradition is a tradition of repetition rather than representation, of copying Virgil rather than nature.*[6]

Landscape painting largely ignored the realities of agricultural life and development, in favour of iconographically produced Arcadian, or at least somewhat idealised representations.[7] In painting, by ignoring the everyday realities of peasant life, and:-

> *dwelling on one protracted moment in time - may indirectly suggest....the denial of change that clinging to tradition often represents....the past is for the pastoralist....(a) basic temporal orientation, a reflection of his quintessentially nonprogressive, conservative, static world view.*[8]

This mode of representation was more prevalent in the eighteenth-century, than in the nineteenth. The use of the pastoral, in nineteenth-century French literature for instance, was becoming infrequent, although remnants of it remained. Perhaps the most important of these remnants was the concept of *locus amoenus*, which was a 'pleasant place,' privileged and secluded, where reflective minds could find peace, harmony, and repose.

Pastoral representations informed the work of the Pont-Aven School. The painting *Solitude* [Plate 3] by Paul Sérusier, for instance, arguably represents a *locus amoenus*, the girl who is the subject of the painting is represented in a contemplative state, in a bucolic and isolated location.[9] The painting shows a girl divorced from the pace of the modern world.

The Pastoral set the past up as a Golden Age of innocence and of pleasure, and was contrasted, unfavourably, with the vices of the present world.

> *Whether or not the contrast is stated, it is always implied: to sing the praises of the simple, innocent, peaceful rural life is by implication to*



Plate 3: Paul Sérusier *Solitude.* 1894. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

> *voice criticism of its complex, vice-ridden, disharmonious urban counterpart.*[10]

During the late eighteenth-century, positive attitudes towards a pastoral nature were increasingly accompanied by more negative attitudes towards the town. As early as 1755, the idea that working on the land satisfied the human spirit, whilst work offered in towns was dehumanising, was supported in Morelly's *Code de la Nature.*[11] Rétif de la Bretonne, in novels such as *Le Paysan perverti* and *La Paysanne pervertie*, in the 1770s, promoted the idea of towns as vice-ridden, corrupting and squalid, and this added to the body of opinion that had developed by the late eighteenth-century of three marked differences between town and country; the former corrupted, brought misery and squalor, whilst the latter promoted virtue, brought happiness, and was a place of purity and quiet.

Such negative attitudes were supported by the apparent underlying current of danger from the urban poor, and the filth in the less salubrious districts, such as the Île de Cité, with the fear of the danger that this posed to public health, apparently revealed by the cholera epidemic of 1832. Suc's contemporary account of what was described as the rotting Parisian underbelly, *Les Mystéres de Paris*, published in the *Journal des Débats* in 1843, vividly described, and brought home to his audience, the danger. This perceived, and indeed real danger from an urban underclass, may be said to have fuelled somewhat idealistic representations of the country, for an urban bourgeois audience.

Landscape as Wilderness

The corollary of Pastoral representations was that the countryside was also seen, by some as being a store of superstition and ignorance, and as having missed all of the benefits of the Enlightenment. Bertho argues that Brittany was seen as both bucolic and sinister.[12] Such attitudes fed and were supported by representations of landscape as Wilderness. This attitude towards the country found credence in

official attitudes. An entry, in the *Archives Nationales* records that children entering school in Brittany in 1880 were "like those of countries where civilisation has not penetrated: savage, dirty, and don't understand a word of the language."[13]

The concept of Wilderness was much more influential on work of the Pont-Aven School than the Pastoral. In *Hilly Landscape With Two Figures* [Plate 4], by Paul Gauguin, for instance, a rugged and bleak landscape is represented.[14] The concept of Wilderness is more fully developed, however, in Gauguin's depictions of Breton peasants struggling to produce crops in a barren environment.

It is interesting to note that Gauguin produced few images of peasant labour, a theme that was common enough in the latter half of the nineteenth-century. When he did chose to portray such scenes, however, in contrast with the harmony implicit in many such paintings of the time, including Bernard's *The Buckwheat Harvest*, Gauguin's representations of rural work showed the strain and the misery involved; his work shows that such labours were to stave off the poverty that was ever present, which Hélias has catalogued as being characterised by Bretons as the World Bitch;

> *Beware of the World Bitch*
> *Which jumps on you and never barks.*[15]

In *The Seaweed Gatherers* [Plate 5], Gauguin depicts this struggle. He wrote to van Gogh in December 1889, at the time he was completing the painting;

> *At the moment, I'm working on a painting of women gathering seaweed on the beach. I have pictured them like boxes rising by steps at regular distanced intervals, in blue clothes and black coifs despite the biting cold....I see this scene every day and it is like a gust of*

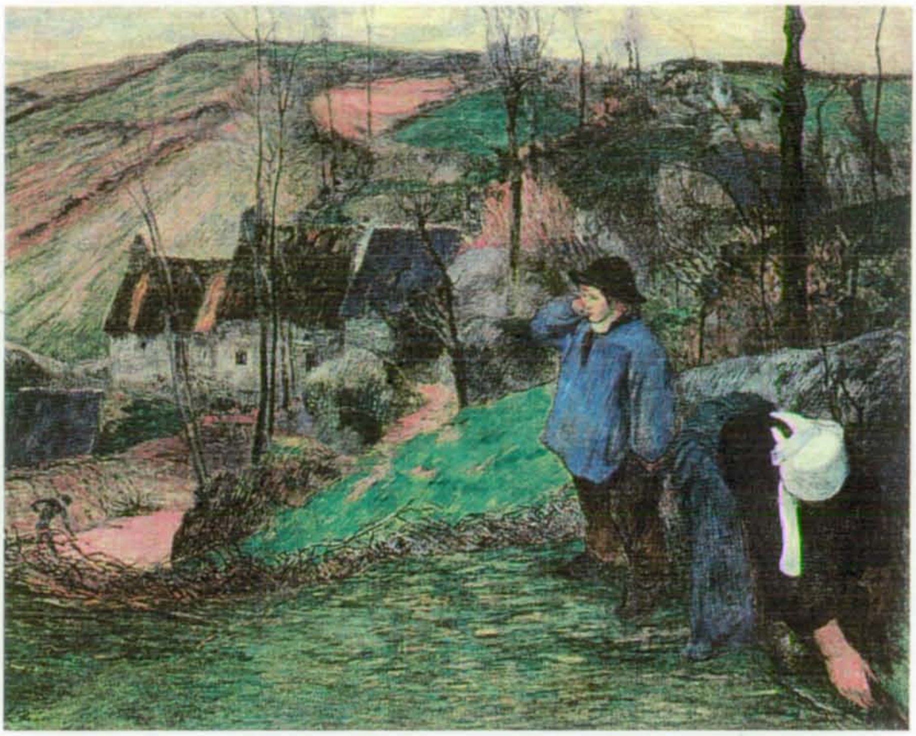


Plate 4: *Hilly Landscape with Two Figures*, Paul Gauguin.

1888. Oil on canvas. The National Museum Of Western Art, Tokyo.

> *wind, a sudden awareness of the struggle for life, of sadness, and of our obedience to the harsh laws of nature.*[16]

In this work, painted whilst Gauguin was staying at Le Pouldu, a small fishing village to the north of Pont-Aven, the peasants depicted have an almost trance-like tranquillity. The state portrayed seems to be induced by the numbing cold, and rigours of the work. This painting, despite being observed from nature, is a symbolic freeze "perfectly expressing the vital energy and melancholy that belong in equal measure to Brittany, to the people of Brittany, and to Paul Gauguin himself."[17]

Although still representing an urban bourgeois view of peasant life, this painting is unusual in showing the misery of such an existence. In the sense of its social commentary, it may be said to have much in common with the work of Pissarro or van Gogh. This is not typical of Gauguin's other work.

Landscape as Picturesque

The importance of a classical pastoral / wilderness dichotomy should not be underplayed in the analysis of late nineteenth-century representations of Brittany. During the nineteenth-century, however, the picturesque became a more influential bourgeois mode of representation of the country.

In picturesque representations, the Breton landscape is depicted on the basis that it is an identifiable and static entity. As Nochlin maintains, with regards to representations of the Orient;

> *One absence is the absence of history. Time stands still in ... all imagery qualified as 'picturesque,' including 19th-century representations of peasants in France itself.*[18]

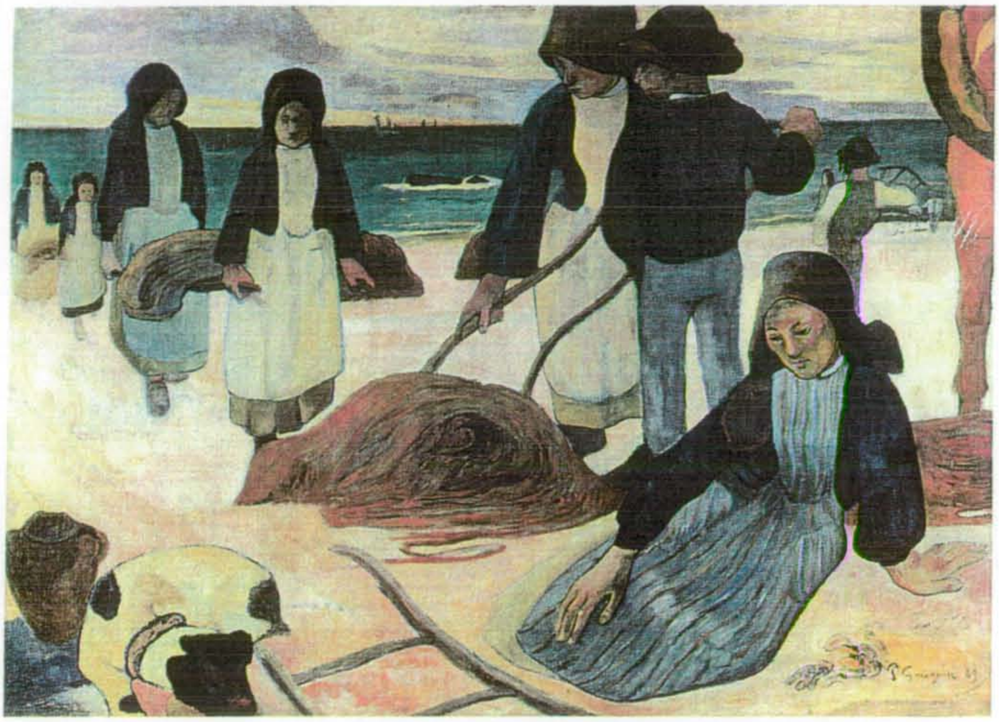


Plate 5: ***The Seaweed Gatherers*****, Paul Gauguin.**

1889. Oil on canvas. Museum Folkwang, Essen.

For Alfred Sensier, an art collector, and, from 1865, a critic at the Salon, rural France was an unchanging society, preserving the value of an organic community, notions of the individual's place within the community, and man's place in the natural order, which he believed had become foreign to urban mentalities.[19]

The term picturesque may be used to classify landscapes that were deemed worthy of representation. Landscape portrayals became increasingly popular from the 1820s, especially in the form of lithographs to illustrate books, for example those contained in the popular series *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*, which contained a volume dealing with Brittany.[20] The increased popularity of landscape art was partly inspired by the creation in 1816, by the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, of the *Grand Prix du paysage historique*, which increased the standing of landscape paintings, and lent such representations academic acceptability.

In another respect the picturesque formed part of the vogue for exploring France that developed after 1815. Napoleon's defeat forced the French to find other channels in which they could celebrate the greatness of France, and this need was in part satisfied by exploring the diversity of France's historical monuments, different areas, and the variety of local customs, and costumes. The collapse of the First Empire led to depictions of France's picturesque regions, as a form of nascent nationalism, although, for Green, this form of rhetoric was not to find its true outlet until the Third Republic.[21] This interest spawned thousands of travel publications.

The realisation that rural society was altering fundamentally, whether for good or bad, may be seen as a major factor in the development of representations of rural France as a major theme in French art in the nineteenth-century. The Barbizon School pioneered the portrayal of the peasantry and rural landscapes as a fit subject for painting in France.[22]

During his first stay at Pont-Aven in the summer of 1888, Paul Sérusier, trained in the academic style at the *Académie Julian*, collaborated with Gauguin. This resulted in the painting, made on a cigar box lid, which Sérusier's fellow pupils at the Académie christened, *The Talisman*.[Plate 6][23] The painting shows, in an abstract form, a woodland scene. The trees of the background, painted in oranges, reds, yellows and greens, and with white trunks, are reflected by a lake in the foreground. Shadows amongst the trees are painted in blue, whilst the rocks to the left of the painting are painted in a red, painted over with brown.[24]

Despite the abstract nature of *The Talisman*, the painting may be said to have been painted in a picturesque manner. That the landscape portrayed is picturesque is born out by the postcard [Plate 7]produced of the same view, taken twelve years before.

The painting is set up in contrast to the urban world of its intended audience. For the nineteenth-century metropolitan tourist, the tranquil aspect of the Bois d'Amour landscape may be seen as presenting a potential escape to the city. In contrast, the same landscape could be used to represent all that was non-progressive about the country, in contrast to the city. The Breton landscape was also characterised as a threatening and superstitious environment. Sérusier's painting arguably draws on this in its dark shadows, and alien and unusual style of representation. *The Talisman* therefore represents the tension between these two conflicting forms of representation of the Breton landscape.

Nineteenth-century Development of the Breton Landscape

It has been argued that the manner in which metropolitan France chose to represent Brittany fell into two categories; an idealised neo-classical landscape, based on Garden and Wilderness; or a cataloguing of a supposedly static, traditional and picturesque landscape. These representations of Brittany were as much to set-up a

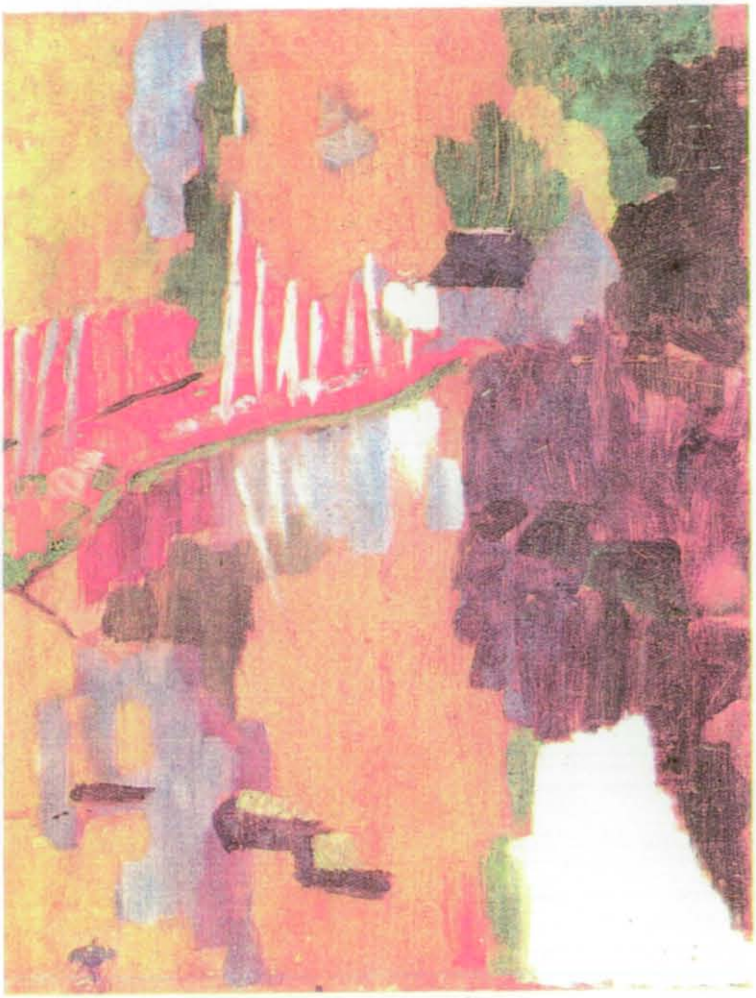


Plate 6: *Landscape in the Bois d'Amour, The Talisman*, Paul Sérusier.

1888. Oil on panel. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Plate 7: Pont-Aven, view of the Bois d'Amour, postcard, 1876.

contrast against which metropolitan France could compare itself, as it was about depicting the Province itself.

Whichever mode of representation was deployed, Brittany was depicted as being less advanced than metropolitan France. Where peasants were shown at labour, for instance, this is shown as traditional subsistence farming. The reality of the working Breton landscape was actually much different, in the period in question.

In the latter half of the nineteenth-century, Brittany was one of the most profitable and productive regions of France. Brittany's development owed much to the reclamation of the wastelands, known as *les landes*, the building of an extensive network of roads and railways, and to the introduction of new crops, such as the potato, and seaweed.[25] From the 1870s onwards, the interior of Brittany was opened by agricultural entrepreneurs such as Jules Rieffel.

This, according to Magraw, meant that a market orientation was brought to Breton peasant agriculture, from this time.[26] The population of Brittany increased significantly, and landless labourers were forced off the land, through mechanisation. This population found work in factories processing the new cash crops of the province, or else was forced to migrate, usually to Paris, forming large urban ethnic minorities.

Artistic representations, however, including those produced by the Pont-Aven School, tended to focus on the more traditional aspects of the Breton countryside. One traditional crop was buckwheat.

Bernard's *The Buckwheat Harvest* [Plate 8], which was painted in 1888, shows peasants harvesting buckwheat with dance-like movements.[27] Despite its distinctive style the painting follows in a tradition of representation of rural labour initiated by the Barbizon School.



Plate 8: *The Buckwheat Harvest*, Émile Bernard.

Buckwheat was a grain crop important to the peasant economy of Brittany. Buckwheat harvesting was a popular subject of representation. Buckwheat was first cultivated in the Breton peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century.[28] It played a critical rôle in the diet of the Breton peasantry. Its rate of growth ensured its success, as it enabled it to be sown after the harvest, on soil which had formerly borne wheat, rye or oats.[29]

The importance of buckwheat to the subsistence Breton farmer is noted in this passage from *The Horse of Pride*, an autobiographical account of life in a turn of the century Breton village, by Pierre-Jacque Hélias;

> *The buckwheat harvest took place in September. The weather had to be fine for the harvest to be adequate. All the tenant farmers, even the poorest of them, like us, had a field of that type of wheat. Generally, it took no more than a sickle to cut it down. Once the reaper had cut enough to make up a good-sized sheaf, he would press it against his knee, holding the spikes in one hand and spreading the stems with the other in order to make a sort of cone that would stand up without having to be tied. That's why fields of reaped buckwheat look very like military campgrounds covered with tents, the touches of red in them glimmering as they sway in the wind.*[30]

Depictions of peasants at work were hampered in the first half of the nineteenth-century, by the technical difficulties of drawing physical labour, and by the fact that such labour was not originally seen as aesthetically pleasing. Such obstacles were cast aside in the second half of the century. Generally, after this point, rural work was depicted as having a slow, and not too strenuous rhythm. Grain harvests formed the subject of many paintings from the 1850s, particularly those made by the Barbizon School.[31] Such canvasses were attractive to the urban market, Brettell



Plate 9: *The Breton Shepherdess*, Paul Gauguin.

1886. Oil on canvas. Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne.

and Brettell contend, as they combined a natural bounty with collective effort, values which were positively associated with the countryside.[32]

The bocage landscape of Brittany is often invoked, in regional studies, as one of the distinguishing features of the Breton landscape. The bocage landscape of Brittany is characterised by deep lanes dividing marshy moors covered with gorse and broom, with trees planted to mark boundaries.[33]

The development of more commercial styles of agriculture in the later nineteenth-century meant that the bocage landscape was being replaced with larger and more open fields.

The Breton Shepherdess [Plate 9], which was painted during Gauguin's first stay in Brittany in 1886, portrays such a landscape.[34] In the painting, he pays close attention to the details of the costume that the woman is wearing. The shepherdess is depicted against a landscape containing scattered trees, hedges, and rolling hills, with a house in a hollow, a bocage landscape.[35] The traditional costume of the shepherdess, and the representation of a bocage landscape, emphasises the portrayal of Brittany as a static entity. By representing a traditional landscape, this painting fits with Nochlin's conception of the picturesque.

Conclusion

In this chapter it has been contended that the representation of Breton landscape owed more to the classical concepts of Pastoral and Wilderness, and to the later European concepts of the Picturesque, than it did to the reality of Brittany in the late nineteenth-century. Perhaps this is fitting when it has been argued, in this chapter, that landscape itself is an artificial construct, designed to help bolster the hegemonic view of society. The hegemonic views of metropolitan France, it is argued, inform the representation of the Breton landscape.

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[1] Duncan, J.S. (1990) The City as Text. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge). p.22. Gregory and Ley also highlight the importance of the translation of the concept of landscape and society into metaphors of text and spectacle, seeing it as an advance over older, morphological approaches to cultural geography. Gregory, D. and Ley , D. (1988) "Editorial: Culture's geographies." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 6 pp.115-116.

[2] See Duncan, The City as Text, p.17

[3] This raises the issue of the researcher's own interpretation of a landscape coming into play. Hermeneutics acknowledges the use of the researcher's intellectual background, and common sense. The researcher also brings along a detachment from being an outsider, which may enable insight into how local beliefs fit into a signifying system. Outsider's' studies of landscapes may themselves be studied, again with critical distance, but these may also be used to highlight an observer's reliance upon the discursive views prevalent in their own society, Duncan, The City as Text., p.13.

[4] Quoted in Duncan, The City as Text., p20.

[5] Green, N. (1990) "Rustic retreats- visions of the countryside in mid-nineteenth-century France." in Pugh, S. (ed.) Reading Landscape. Manchester University Press (Manchester), pp.161-176, p.169.

[6] p.10 of Kadish, D.Y. (1987) The Literature of Images. Rutgers University Press (New Brunswick).

[7] Hugh Prince, in his paper *Art and agrarian change, 1710-1815* develops an argument for eighteenth century England, that I contend is equally valid for late nineteenth-century Brittany. Prince, H. (1988) "Art and agrarian change, 1710-1815." in Cosgrove, D. and Daniels, S. [eds.] The Iconography of Landscape. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge), p.98.

[8] Quoted from Kadish, The Literature of Images, p. 12.

[9] Sérusier painted *Solitude* in 1894, long after Gauguin had ceased to be a regular visitor to Brittany. This painting, however, still displays the influence of Gauguin. Although much less abstract than Sérusier's earlier work this painting is still very much in the synthetist style of the

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Pont-Aven School. It shows a solitary Breton girl, dressed in traditional Breton costume, in a state of contemplation. The girl is sitting in a field, which is bounded by the hedgerow and trees of the background of the painting. This picture, which is predominantly green, with the clothes of the girl being painted in earthy tones, may be said to be a representation of a pastoral landscape.

p.87 Thomson, B. (1983) The Post-Impressionists. Phaidon (London).

[10] Quoted from Kadish, The Literature of Images, p.14.

[11] Green, N. (1990) The Spectacle of Nature. Manchester University Press (Manchester), p.100.

[12] On this see Bertho, C. (1980) "L'invention de la Bretagne genese sociale d'un stéréotype." Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales. 35, pp.45-63.

[13] This, according to Weber, was an attitude that transferred itself to the countryside as well, which townsfolk often regarded as a wilderness. p.4 in: Weber, E. (1977) Peasants into Frenchmen. Chatto & Windus (London).

[14] *Hilly Landscape with Two Figures*, painted in February 1888, employs a common technique of Gauguin's. The landscape has been drawn from nature, with the figures that have been applied to it, being drawn from a portfolio of sketches. This may be seen from the fact that the two figures are not in proportion with each other. This work is still quite Impressionistic, making references to Pissarro's work, and was painted before the stylistic developments of the summer. The first figure, a woman, shown clad in traditional costume, is gathering firewood. The other figure, a boy, is shown dressed in a blue smock, with brown trousers, clogs, and a shapeless black hat with a surrounding rim. The two figures are set against a winter landscape, undulating with hedges, scattered bare trees, a sunken inset road, and isolated houses against a grey sky. In 1886, the critic Félix Fénéon said that Gauguin was not an Impressionist but was concerned with expressing emotion and feelings, rather than recording nature;

The muffled harmony in M. Paul Gauguin's paintings flows from the close-set tones he uses. Dense trees gush from rich, humid, lush soil, overflowing the frame, banishing the sky. A heavy air. A glimpse of bricks suggests a nearby house, hides stretch, muzzles part the brushwood-cows.

from p.23 of Denvir, B. (1992) Post-Impressionism. Thames and Hudson (London).

This picture, however, seems more like one of Gauguin's earlier works, and may well have been merely a study to work through some ideas.

[15] Popular saying, recounted in Hélias, P.-J. (1975) The Horse of Pride. Yale University Press (New Haven)., p.18.

[16] Gauguin continues, to describe his use of colour, and the paintings composition;
The seaweed they are collecting to fertilize their land is ochre, with tawny highlights. The sand is pink, not yellow, probably because it is wet, and the sea is a dark colour....It is this awareness that I have tried to put on canvas, not haphazardly, but methodically, perhaps by exaggerating the rigidity of some of the women's poses and the darkness of some of the colours etc. All this may be mannered to some extent, but on the other hand is there anything about a painting we can really call natural? Since the very earliest times, everything about painting has been utterly conventional, intentional, etc.

p.175, National Gallery of Art, Washington/ The Art Institute of Chicago (1988) The Art of Paul Gauguin. National Gallery of Art, Washington/ The Art Institute of Chicago.

[17] François Cachin quoted in The Art of Paul Gauguin., p.175.

[18] p.153, Nochlin, L. (1983) "The Imaginary Orient." Art in America. 17 pp.119-191.

[19] See p.47, Parson, C. and McWilliam, N. (1983) "'Le Paysan de Paris' : Alfred Sensier and the Myth of Rural France." Oxford Art Journal 6 pp.38-58.

[20] Green The Spectacle of Nature, p.100.

[21] Green The Spectacle of Nature, p.100.

[22] Dunlop, R.O. (1954) Landscape Painting. Seeley, Service & Co. Ltd. (London), p.91.

[23] This picture was the main influence in the formation of the *Nabis*, a group of young Symbolist painters who were active in Paris in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century. The term *Nabis*

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was derived from the Hebrew for prophet "neebin," and was suggested by the Hebrew scholar Auguste Cazalis.

Denvir, Post-Impressionism., p.121.

One of that group, Maurice Denis, said that *The Talisman* showed that

all works of art are a transposition,....the passionate equivalent of an experienced sensation.

Denis quoted on p.168 of Bazarov, K. (1981) Landscape Painting. Octopus Books Limited (London).

In the August 1890 edition of *Art et critique*, Denis' article *A Definition of Neo-Traditionism*, stressed the importance of colour and surface, over literal representation;

Remember that a painting - before it is a battlehorse, a nude woman, or some anecdote - is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.

Maurice Denis, August 1890 "A Definition of Neo-Traditionalism." Art et critique., quoted in Nochlin, L. (1966) Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874-1904. Prentice Hall (London).

[24] *The Talisman* represents an extreme example of the synthetist style that the Pont-Aven School had been developing over the summer of 1888. When Sérusier was painting *The Talisman*, Gauguin asked him;

How do you see these trees? They are yellow. Well then, put down yellow. And that shadow is rather blue. So render it with pure ultramarine. Those red leaves. Use vermilion.

Gauguin quoted in of Bazarov Landscape Painting, p.168.

It was intended by Gauguin as an object lesson in the new style for Sérusier,. The painting represented as much what the artist felt, as what he saw, enabling nature to be consumed on a personal, as well as a public, level. As Gauguin said;

In painting one must search rather for suggestion than for description, as is done in music.

Bazarov Landscape Painting, p.168.

[25] Magraw, R. (1983) France 1815-1914: The Bourgeois Century. Fontana (London), p.292.

[26] Magraw France 1815-1914: The Bourgeois Century, p.323.

[27] The painting was made at the height of the Pont-Aven School's experimentation with cloissionism (the use of blocks of unmixed single colours, divided by borders of black or blue), and certainly reflects this in its style. The simplification, and use of block colours has much in common with Bernard's other major painting of that year, Breton Women in a Meadow. The uniform red background of The Buckwheat Harvest, possibly influenced by the red tinge of the buckwheat, offers a similarly abstract background as the green background of this other painting.

[28] Braudel, F. (1986) The Identity of France. Volume 2: People and Production. Collins (London), p.175.

[29] The manner in which buckwheat was grown, and the uses to which it was put, are described in this passage;

[buckwheat] can be sown on stubble, after cutting the corn (and without any further ploughing, in July or August); by the end of October it has yielded a crop not without value to the farmer; the flour made form this grain makes a heavy and nourishing bread; it can [also] be used for soups; but its chief and most valuable use is, either as grain or flour, for fattening poultry, turkeys and pigs. The straw can usefully be added to dunghills. If the plant is ploughed under at the time of flowering, it makes the field able to carry a good cereal crop at once; in regions where the harvest is later and the sowing earlier, one cannot take advantage of this interval which is too short to get buckwheat up, and it has to be sown in the spring.

Menuret, J.-J. (1791) "Mémoire sur la culture des jachéres.": Quoted in Braudel The Identity of France. Volume 2, p.268.

[30] p.239 of Hélias, The Horse of Pride.

[31] The Barbizon School is seen by many art historians as the precursor of the Impressionist movement. It was based in the village of that name on the edge of the forest of Fontainebleau, was active from the 1830s until the 1870s, and included such painters such as Millet and Courbet. Dunlop, R.O. (1954) Landscape Painting, Seeley, Service & Co. Ltd. (London), p.91.

[32] p.34, Brettell, R.R. and Brettell, C.B. (1983) Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth Century. Rizzoli (New York)..

[33] The bocage was not restricted to Brittany, however, but was found with variations across much of western and central France. It has been suggested that the bocage was an invention of the Celts or Gauls, although Braudel contends that it may well be of less ancient origin than has previously been assumed. Braudel, F. (1988) Identity of France: Volume 1: History and Environment. Collins (London), p.136.

Braudel quotes a description of the bocage landscape, given in a nineteenth-century history;

the fields are lined with tall hedges, full of all kinds of trees (planted on a raised ridge or talus); the space enclosed within them is usually planted out with apples and pear trees for cider and perry, which gives the whole the appearance of a huge forest. The farms are of 30 or 40 hectares on average; some are much smaller, 10 to 12 hectares only and known as closeries because they consist of a single enclosed field.

Description based on Maine-et-Loire, p.186 of Léonce de Lavergne "Economie rurale de la France depuis 1789." (1877), quoted on p. 349-350 of Braudel Identity of France: Volume 2

The landscape was believed to order the development of rural Breton communities and societies. These communities tended to be self-sufficient, but tended to cluster around a central hamlet, often referred to as a 'bourg;' a cluster of houses, generally inhabited by a small number of privileged families, around the parish church. Only the weekly markets and the occasional activity brought by fairs disrupted the isolation of these communities. In the nature of things, considerable social distance came to be marked between the privileged residents of the 'centre' and the peasants in the outlying farms. Braudel, Identity of France: Volume 1, p.135.

[34] Gauguin made several preparatory sketches, and studies for this painting. The painting features a single female figure, probably sketched using a model. She is a traditionally clad Breton girl,

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dressed in a coif, with a black dress, white pinafore and clogs, in a state of repose. The painting shows signs of how Gauguin was already developing a definite, solid outline for his figures, a technique he employed more in later work, with the development of clossionism. The landscape is still clearly Impressionistic in style. The composition and tilted perspective foreshadows the experiments of 1888-89, yet this picture is far from the sombre primitivism of his later canvasses. p.62 The Art of Paul Gauguin.

[35] The figure of the shepherdess appears several times in later works. Gauguin often reused figures that he had made studies of, in several works. Gauguin often used his subjects as little more than a means by which to further his stylistic development. p.62 The Art of Paul Gauguin.

Images of Breton Peasantry

I would love the peasants, if the peasant did not disgust me....He is original sin, surviving and visible in all its brutal naïveté.[1]

So observed Joseph Roux, a Breton country priest, in his 1885 book *Pensées*. Zola and Balzac amongst others, held the opinion that the peasant was a savage. An alternative view, which held equal currency in late nineteenth-century France, was that the peasant was a bulwark of Catholic piety, and held the key to the true identity of France, a view held by George Sand, amongst others.

The belief that there was a fundamental difference between town and country dwellers reflects the massive social changes that were going on in the nineteenth-century. Much of the literature on the rural/urban dichotomy, which was produced at the time, was written from an urban perspective. As metropolitan France became more and more similar, largely modelling itself on Paris, regional diversity remained in the countryside.[2] This diversity came to be celebrated at the same time as it was being eroded by the same forces of change that had earlier affected the towns.

One way in which this diversity came to be celebrated, during the nineteenth-century, was through the pictorial representation of France's peasants, their costumes, customs, and rituals. By the late 1840s, French painters had turned away from classical themes, exemplified in the works of David, to their own country for peasant subjects for their pictures.[3]

The peasantry, which had not previously been considered a fit subject for painting, was looked on more favourably following the advent of scientific rationalism, and the fascination with the 'savage' which stemmed from the works of Rousseau. This manifested itself in the form of Realist paintings of the peasantry, alongside ethnographical accounts, travel writings, and the cataloguing of folk tales, songs, customs, and costumes.[4] If the Northern European peasantry were not viewed as

the eighteenth-century Noble Savage, they were at least viewed as closer to nature than their urban counterparts.

The Salon of 1850 marked the acme of Realist renderings of the peasant motif particularly by the Barbizon School, with, for example, Millet's *The Sower*, and Courbet's *Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair*. Many, although not all, artists of this period portrayed the peasantry as ahistorical figures, divorced from the political processes of time, and as such, they represent what may be characterised as a late Romantic view.[5]

Representations of the Peasantry

The representation of rural society became increasingly popular throughout the nineteenth-century. Brittany, for instance, first attracted artists in the 1820s and 1830s. Representations of Brittany produced then, LePaul maintains, were coloured by Romantic aesthetic considerations, rather than by actuality. In the 1860s, another generation of artists, *Les Académiques*, brought their strict academic training to bear in representing Brittany. They came to Brittany in search of picturesque motifs, which were to prove popular in the Paris Salons.[6]

Brettell and Brettell make the interesting point that from the 1880s, when many artists tried to escape mimesis, the imitation of nature, it is curious that they chose the 'natural' peasant as the subject of their 'artificial' painting.[7] The centre of this anti-realist painting was France, with painters such as Pissarro and Gauguin.

In the wake of the work of Courbet and Millet of the Barbizon School, many of the more radical artists were choosing peasants as a subject. An idea of the honesty of the peasantry, and the value of working on the land, shaped the images that many developed. It was on this point that Gauguin differed from many of his contemporaries.

Whereas Pissarro based his paintings on the belief that "work is the moral regulator of man",[8] Gauguin had no such ideological basis for his painting. Gauguin's portrayals, alongside that of the rest of the Pont-Aven School, can be seen as showing the world of the Breton peasant as being closed to them, and the modern viewer.

Whilst Pissarro and van Gogh invested their images of the peasantry with particular moralistic meanings, Gauguin mostly neglected humanitarian and moralistic possibilities in his studies of peasants, in favour of a personal and overtly symbolist imagery.[9] In using symbolism, Gauguin reduced his peasant subjects to purely decorative motifs. A synthesist methodology was developed, which drew upon techniques developed from ceramic decoration. This resulted in simplified, and highly stylised images.[10]

Despite the stylistic differences of the works produced by Gauguin, and the Pont-Aven School, the representations of Brittany that they produced, it is contended in this study, fell into this category as much as those of more conventional artists. Their picturesque nature is shown through the unique costumes and customs of the Breton peasants portrayed, and is also accomplished by the artist concentrating on the festive aspects of their lives. By avoiding painting the routine aspects of the Bretons' lives, the artists of the Pont-Aven School were emphasising a part of the Bretons' lives which were unusual to them, as well as to the urban audience for whom the paintings were intended.

The use of a synthetist style is evident in Gauguin's first big canvas of Brittany *Four Breton Women* [Plate 10], according to Freches-Thory's analysis. Despite it being one of his earlier portrayals of Brittany having been painted in 1886, before Gauguin had fully developed synthetism, a simplified style is evident. The only real detail in the Breton women portrayed is in the costume of the two figures in the foreground. The women may therefore be seen as motifs, elements in a



Plate 10: *Four Breton Women*, Paul Gauguin.

1886. Oil on canvas. Bayerrische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich.

composition in much the same way as the inanimate objects in a still-life. The rear figure in profile [Plate 11], is painted in very little detail, and is probably only included in the composition to balance the group of figures, by completing the circle they form. With the woman viewed from the rear [Plate 12], the emphasis is on the detail of her bonnet, and the folds of her skirt. *Four Breton Women* was constructed by sketching live models, separately, and then superimposing them onto a background.

Regional Differences and Agents of Change

As France entered the Nineteenth-century, there were still marked differences between the Provinces, including Brittany, and metropolitan France.[11] This showed itself in differences in language, custom and costume over relatively short distances, which resulted from a lack of contact between different communities.[12]

The majority of the population of France, spoke dialects and patois other than French, for instance; Breton, Corsican, or Flamand.[13] This situation persisted well into the nineteenth-century. Although, by the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, Breton had been considerably eroded, in 1881, over a million people, mainly on the edge of the Breton peninsula, still spoke the language, with little or no understanding of French.[14]

In order to try and spread fluency in French, the national government took action, for instance, by trying to ban preaching in Breton.[15] This was typical of an ongoing attempt by metropolitan France to impose a unifying identity upon all the provinces of France. Loughlin contends that the process of French centralisation began under the *Ancien Régime*, was reinforced by the Jacobin Republic, and was completed under the Napoleonic First Empire.[16]

It was certainly evident by the late nineteenth-century that the processes of assimilation, which had been working since Brittany's union with France, were



Plate 11: Sketch for *Four Breton Women.*
Figure viewed in profile.



Plate 12: Sketch for *Four Breton Women*, figure viewed from rear.

beginning to have a marked effect. Brittany's towns were assimilated much more readily than rural areas, with the result of making them isolated pockets of French society in a hostile sea of Breton culture;

> *After its forced union with France in the sixteenth century, Brittany's towns were invaded by Frenchmen who overbore or replaced the native merchants and Frenchified the people they employed or otherwised influenced. Royal ports like Lorient and Brest were garrison towns in foreign territory, and the term colony was frequently employed to describe them..... things in Brittany had changed only slightly by the 1880's.*[17]

By the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, the republic had managed to install a number of effective institutional agents of change, to spread the assimilation of Breton society to the countryside.[18] At the same time, the peninsula became more accessible, both to goods from France, and also French influences.

The Perceived Rôle of the Peasant

With the existence of supposedly traditional peasant society under threat, the position of the peasant in the French state came into question. In the latter half of the nineteenth-century, the peasant came to be seen as a bulwark against working class militancy which was fermenting in the cities. By the 1850s, *chouannerie*, the populist Royalist uprising against the Revolution that occurred in the west of France, was no longer considered to be a tangible threat to the state, and the rise of socialism meant that the Breton was recast in the role of loyal citizen. The Breton, passive subject of representation as ever, came to be seen predominantly in the bucolic mould, drawing largely on the folklorist's cataloguing of the Bretons' external indicators of their way of life, such as costume and language.

From the 1850s, Brittany became the epitome of the province where conservative opinion projected a reactionary utopia of an agrarian society living without conflict, under the leadership of its traditional masters. The most typical representation of the Breton became feminine, particularly a young Breton woman wearing a characteristic headdress. This figure was supposedly a symbol of innocence and piety.[19]

Gauguin's representations of Brittany are dominated by female figures. In part this may be explained by the predominance of the female form in Western art. Alternatively his work could be said to be informed by the predominantly female nature of the Breton stereotype, that was developing towards the end of the nineteenth-century.

This stereotype was tied up with conservative notions of traditional Brittany, as an idyllic rural community of innocence and piety. The fact that women were predominantly represented may also be connected with the faster decline of 'traditional' costumes amongst male Bretons, making the women more picturesque.

In his painting *Breton Girls Dancing* [Plate 13], painted early in the summer of 1888, Gauguin was inspired by the dancing celebrations that occurred at haymaking times, which were said to date back to druidic times.[20] Bretons dancing were a common theme portrayed by the Pont-Aven School.[21] He wrote to Theo van Gogh, describing the painting;

> *I'm doing a gavotte bretonne, three little girls dancing in a hayfield. I think you'll like it. The painting seems original to me and I'm quite pleased with the composition.*[22]



Plate 13: *Breton Girls Dancing*, Paul Gauguin.

1888. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

This painting is similar to *Four Breton Women* in its treatment of the Breton peasantry. Again the figures portrayed are female, and dressed in what was perceived to be traditional Breton costume.

As such, both this painting and *Four Breton Women* can be said to represent peasant life as a leisured and pleasant existence. It shows a rural society following seemingly timeless traditions, which in fact, in terms of the costumes worn, were of relatively recent origin, and which were giving way before the encroachment of urban influences.

Not all views of rural society were positive, however. With the creation of Breton ghettos in France's large cities, especially Paris, the notion of the Bretons as a foreign people gained currency. These urban ghettos, a hotbed of Breton nationalism, made the urban bourgeoisie acutely aware of the differences between themselves and the Bretons. As an agriculturist wrote, in 1863;

> *The Breton people forms, in the middle of the nation....a population apart.*[23]

This difference was still perceived some seventeen years later. Baudoin, rector of the *Académie de Rennes*, wrote in 1880;

> *Brittany, which was not willingly joined to France, which never whole-heartedly accepted its annexation, which still protests....Frenchify Brittany as promptly as possible....; integrate western Brittany with the rest of France.*[24]

Towards the end of the nineteenth-century the Breton became a pathetic figure of derision. This was partly in an attempt to coerce Breton assimilation. Bertho

identifies the period between 1880 and 1910, as one when a fundamental change in the means of representation of the province occurred.[25]

In contrast to the work of Millet, and others, many have found Gauguin's portrayals of the peasantry, especially in *Four Breton Women*, to be bovine, or bestial. The figure on the left of this painting may be said to have a positively porcine face. In this Gauguin may be thought of as mirroring eighteenth and early nineteenth-century travel writing, wherein the peasantry was represented as little more than beasts of burden.[26] Despite his protestations to the contrary, Gauguin may have been said to have held rather negative views of the Breton peasantry. His views of the rôle of the peasantry in the Revolution illustrate this;

> *What is remarkable about the great Revolution is that the leaders were the led. A flock of sheep leading another flock. Everything begins well only to end badly. Morat seems to me the one man who knew what he wanted. Naturally he had to be killed by a woman;-the grain of sand that stops the machine!*[27]

The ugliness of the figure on the left, of *Four Breton Women*, together with the pose of the figure to the right (which would seem to be a clumsy parody of one of Degas' ballet dancers), might also suggest that Gauguin's work fell within the metropolitan bourgeois tradition of ridicule of the peasantry.

Peasant Society as Picturesque

Just as the destruction of the bocage landscape led to it being classified as picturesque, so the breakdown of what was perceived as traditional Breton culture brought the Breton peasant to the attention of metropolitan society;

> *The picturesque is pursued throughout the nineteenth-century like a form of peculiarly elusive wildlife, requiring increasingly skilful tracking as the delicate prey disappears into the hinterland.*[28]

One of the main reasons for the production of picturesque imagery, Nochlin maintains, is to capture and record that of the traditional that is being destroyed by the encroachment of the modern world.[29]

In the later decades of the nineteenth-century, Brittany in particular captured the imagination of folklorists and artists. Breton culture was thought to have remained more intact than that of any other province. The leading French travel writer of the nineteenth-century, Adolphe Joanne, wrote;

> *Brittany offers a character more distinct, more startling, more original...her more poetic traditions...the population is distinguished from that of other provinces by its physical features, its costume, its habits, its customs, beliefs, superstitions; in a word, Brittany is one of the true curiosities of France.*[30]

This may have made the Province of particular interest to artists, including the Pont-Aven School. As de Thubert wrote, in relation to the work of Sérusier;

> *He wanted to paint allegories, but what subjects offered themselves to him? Those of Greek and Roman mythology. He needed more primitive symbols; he found them in his Brittany.....Sérusier is right to break with the classics. He enters into a very different antiquity.....It is evident that the mystery which he penetrates in Brittany lies at the bottom of every Frenchman's heart. It is the dream which the oldest race in the world, the Celts, have dreamed of*

> *themselves through all the cycles of time....Thus this work is marked by a great character; an ethnic national character.*[31]

The erosion of rural diversity caused an upsurge in the popularity of folklore societies, and other means of cataloguing peasant society, amongst the rural elite and metropolitan groups.[32] From 1800, research into the nature of rural society was justified by the notion of disappearing customs. Rural customs were always subject to change, and ultimately extinction, as they out lived their usefulness. From the start of the nineteenth-century onwards, however, they came to be seen by the, usually metropolitan, observer as static, and as always having been in existence up until the present, when they began to wane. Rural customs were characterised, from this point, as bequeathed by ancestors, whose inheritors were unaware of its value. The folklorists who began to take an interest in rural values at this time, who were invariably drawn from the elite, saw it as their rôle to preserve this treasure.

One result of the folklore movement, Moulin contends, was to change the way that the peasant was perceived, and portrayed in art. Their world increasingly came to be shown as one of contentment and harmony; "The peasant represents a moral, virtuous world, set well apart from the vice and corruption of the town."[33]

After being defined as picturesque, peasant society came to be consumed by metropolitan society in a number of different forms. One of the main forms of consumption was through tourism.

Tourism

Tourists had been attracted to Brittany since before the Romantic era, by the picturesque moors, rocky coasts, the primitive churches and statues, and by the quaint peasants.[34] During the eighteenth-century, Brittany was often included in the itinerary of gentlemen's' tours.[35]

After 1830 tourism mainly took the form of Romantic tours. Figures such as Flaubert, Michelet, and Mérinée travelled around Brittany, still interested in sites of archaeological interest, but now also taking note of rural lifestyles. Their journeys, to some extent, legitimised and renewed the representations of Brittany forged in a national, literary and 'Parisian' context.

Thomas Adolphus Trollope wrote of Pont-Aven, in 1840;

> *...there alone can the painter encounter the savage and thrilling majesty of nature, untainted by any trace of modernity and dotted with Druid, religious and feudal ruins, like the scattered pages of a forgotten tale.*[36]

By 1857, the railway had reached Rennes, and by 1863, it was extended north to Dinan, and south to Quimper. The appearance of the railways ushered in a new period of tourism to the peninsula. The tour guides, which accompanied the beginning of mass tourism, contributed to the development of a regional stereotype. The guides attempted to create a Brittany which was worthwhile the tourists' effort to visit, and in so doing they concentrated on the area's monuments, picturesque landscapes, and picturesque customs, ignoring the everyday aspects of Breton life which were obviously central to Breton society. This made the area even more popular with artists, many of whom came for the entire summer, to escape the city.

By the mid 1860s, according to LePaul, the Pont-Aven's four or five inns [Plate 14] often housed over one hundred artists between them, of many differing nationalities.[37] In 1880, the Englishman Henry Blackburn praised its charms, in his travel guide *An Artistic Tour in Brittany* [Plate 15];



Plate 14: The Pension Gloanec at Pont-Aven, 1888.

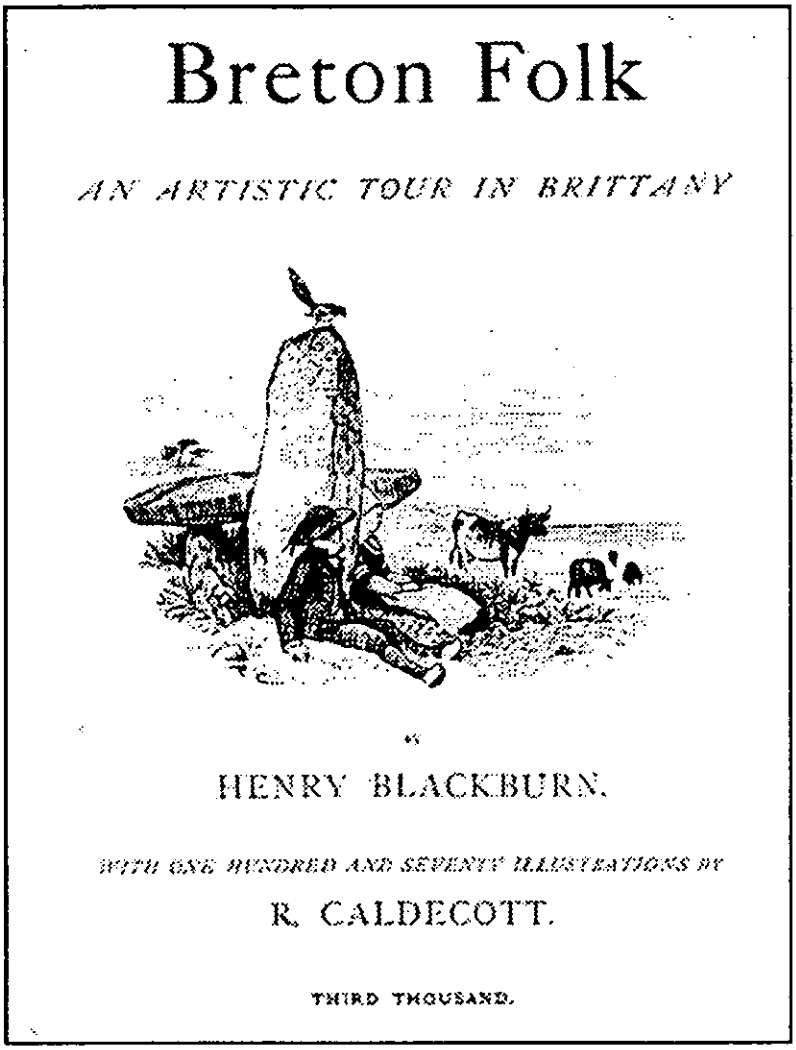
The inn at which Gauguin, and many of the Pont-Aven School, stayed.

> *Pont-Aven is a favourite spot for artists, and a terra incognita to the majority of travellers in Brittany. Here the art student, who has spent the winter in the Quartier Latin in Paris, comes when the leaves are green, and settles down for the summer to study undisturbed.*[38]

In the hotels in which the tourists stayed, as much was done as was possible to recreate metropolitan life. When Bretons did appear in such surroundings, they were dressed in Breton costume, and were very much for show. Tourism cut the traveller off from the real Brittany, and encouraged them to consume a replacement, which was based on objects, be they costumes, or places of interest. As Gauguin once complained, "Tourists to-day see so little."[39] This was also reflected by a burgeoning souvenir industry, based largely on the production of postcards, Breton dolls and jewellery. In many ways, the tourist industry reinforced the stereotypes that developed of Breton society.

The tour guides that were produced for Brittany, towards the end of the nineteenth-century, pandered to bourgeois taste by concentrating on monuments and picturesque landscapes, rather than the changing working landscape of Brittany. Writings about the province's Druidic traditions, and the monographs on the Cathedrals reminded their audience of the fact that the Celts were a supposedly mysterious, and religious race. Such scholarly production formed the base of the literature aimed at tourists. This literature, predominantly written in Paris for a metropolitan audience, offered a countryside worth reading, to its audience, presenting a series of sacred places, and monumental relics, always with an accompanying anecdote.[40]

This is reflected in the Pont-Aven School's choice of subject. The subjects would arguably be what urban bourgeois would see on holiday. The members of the Pont-Aven School may be seen as both as tourists, and producing art for a market created by tourism.


Breton Folk

AN ARTISTIC TOUR IN BRITTANY

BY

HENRY BLACKBURN.

WITH ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY ILLUSTRATIONS BY

R. CALDECOTT.

THIRD THOUSAND.

Plate 15:*An Artistic Tour in Brittany*, title page of the book by Henry Blackburn, 1880.

The inhabitants of Pont-Aven were well used to such artistic tourists as well, according to a nineteenth-century British guide book. In deed, the inhabitants of the village adapted their lifestyles and activities to take economic advantage of the presence of such artists:-

> *Pont-Aven has one advantage over other places in Brittany; its inhabitants in their picturesque costume (which remains unaltered) have learned that to sit as a model is a pleasant and lucrative profession, and they do this for a small fee without hesitation or mauvaise honte. This is a point of great importance to the artist, and one which some may be glad to learn through these pages. The peasants, both men and women, are glad to sit for a franc for the greater part of a day....*[41]

The development of a Breton identity during the nineteenth-century, accompanied the rise of tourism in the province. Orton and Pollock contend that, for the purposes of tourism, Brittany was packaged as a picturesque and romantic region. Brittany, and its people, were set up as a spectacle to be consumed by the tourist. The Bretons were not unwilling to put themselves on show, especially at the Pardons and fetes, when they frequently adopted dress costume.[42]

Breton Costume

One of the main ways in which folklorists and other chose to celebrate Brittany's difference was through what was styled as traditional Breton costume [Plate 16]. The Breton nationalist movement was largely responsible for propagating the idea that the dress costume, worn at pardons and fetes, was traditional and Celtic. The costume book genre which developed in the nineteenth-century, for example, the lithographs produced by François Charpentier, was one means through which this was manifest.



Plate 16: Young girl wearing a Pont-Aven bonnet, postcard, c. 1894.

In fact, until the French Revolution, peasants' costumes were regulated by sumptuary laws, so as to designate their position in society. Breton costume developed in the nineteenth-century, as the peasantry became more affluent, and as highly decorated and coloured cloth became cheaper, and more widely available, as a result of mass production.[43] In fact, as Weber contends;

> *Growing prosperity meant richer costumes, and the late nineteenth-century was Brittany's gaudiest age.*[44]

Despite the fact that such Breton costume was a relatively new development, by the mid nineteenth-century it was widely adopted and worn, especially during ceremonial occasions. As far as the Pont-Aven School was concerned, Pont-Aven's inhabitants were, in the words of Denvir;

> *Picturesquely and unselfconsciously clad in traditional costume, its inhabitants combined religiosity, superstition and a contempt for city dwellers in proportions which made them irresistible to the generation of Post-Impressionism.*[45]

The perceived timelessness of peasant costume, it was thought, would lend a timeless quality to the works of the Pont-Aven School. Paul Sérusier, one of the artists of the Pont-Aven School wrote;

> *From deduction to deduction I wanted allegories and rejected Greek ones; I was in a Celtic country; I imagined fairies; modern dress changes too frequently; I adopted for my figures a Breton costume that is ageless.*[46]

Pollock and Orton infer that most members of the Pont-Aven School, were seduced by anachronistic images of Brittany, which he sought to reproduce. In contrast, Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow* [Plate 17] reflected the changing times, and awkward social relations that characterised the period within which it was painted.[47] *Breton Women in a Meadow*, painted in 1888, emphasises the discontinuity between men and women, adults and children, and the urban bourgeoisie and the peasantry.[48]

The discontinuity highlighted by Orton and Pollock is borne out chiefly by the fact that these groups are unitary, and exclude each of the other groups. Thus two women dressed in the urban fashions of the time, complete with umbrellas, in the top left hand quarter of the painting, are engaged in conversation separately from the other groups. It is not clear whether these two figures are metropolitan tourists visiting the province, or whether they are Bretons who have adopted urban clothing.[49] For Pollock and Orton, the new, highly leisured peasantry was not too different from the town dweller, in that they shared many of the same leisure habits.[50]

Hélias noted that;

> *giving up their costume, unless out of dire need, was still considered a betrayal and almost a sign of degeneration. It was the poorest among us who were the first to change their 'look,' for the simplest reason that it was cheaper to buy clothes in the city....one had to be rich to dress like a peasant.*
>
> *To children, any adult in a Bigouden costume was a moereb (an aunt) or an eontr (an uncle). Dressed in city clothes, adults were nothing at all; no communication was possible.*[51]



Plate 17: *Breton Women in a Meadow,* Émile Bernard.

1888. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Even so, towards the end of the century, urban clothing was becoming increasingly more popular, particularly amongst the young. As Hélias notes, it was the men who gave up their costume first. It was through urban influences such as newspapers that urban clothing was popularised in Brittany.

Conclusion

In a sense then, the regional identities that the folklorists were trying to preserve were actually a relatively recent invention. It has been contended that the invention of a picturesque past, for rural societies, was for the benefit of the urban bourgeoisie who were increasingly coming to consume the countryside as tourists.

In this chapter, it has been argued that Gauguin's work was mainly aimed at an intellectual, bourgeois, metropolitan French audience. The paintings were largely received as an affirmation of existing, and somewhat conservative metropolitan attitudes towards rural France in general, and Brittany particular. It would seem that the themes chosen by Gauguin had little significance beyond providing material for him to apply his new stylistic ideas to. The images that Gauguin produced of Brittany were, with one or two variations, based on the same themes adopted by artists, in their representations of Brittany, throughout the nineteenth-century, themes also informed by bourgeois metropolitan attitudes towards the province. It is argued that Gauguin's representations of Brittany, despite the innovative nature of portrayal that he employed, still represented the anachronistic and idealised portrayal of Brittany that is typically seen to be the domain of more academically inclined artists, such as Jules Breton and Pascal Dagnon-Bouveret.

Whilst trying to preserve, or record the rural society that was perceived to be giving way to urban influences, the Pont-Aven School, and other artists who represented Brittany, actually formed part of this urban influence. Along with the related phenomena of tourism, artists who represented Brittany accelerated the urbanisation of Brittany, by encouraging the development of resorts that could

provide the levels of amenities that they were used to in urban centres such as Paris. Another effect was to commodify Breton life, causing it to be packaged for the consumption of the artist or tourist.

In setting themselves up for display, by dressing in 'traditional' costumes, and taking part in 'traditional' festivities, the Breton people were perpetuating a fiction about themselves, which had been created at the time of the Revolution according to Bertho's analysis. This fiction, originally authored by the urban bourgeoisie, was now being offered as the truth to the same audience. The fact that this fiction had been initiated at the end of the eighteenth-century, and still holds credence to this day, is evidence of the power of the notion upon which the fiction was originally constructed, namely that the countryside was a static entity capable of being permanently recorded and thus preserved from change.

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[1] p.132 of Zeldin, T. (1973) France 1848-1945: Volume One; Ambition, Love and Politics. Clarendon Press (Oxford).

[2] Green, N. (1990) The Spectacle of Nature. Manchester University Press (Manchester), p.11-12.

[3] On the work of David, and the use of classical themes in French academic painting, see Roberts, W. (1989) Jacque-Louis David, revolutionary artist: art, politics and the French Revolution. University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln).

[4] p.27 Brettell, R.R. and Brettell, C.B. (1983) Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century. Rizzoli (New York).

[5] The perceived Celtic or Gaulish origin of Brittany's bocage landscape, made the province a natural target for the attentions of the Romantics. Romanticism rose to prominence in the early nineteenth-century, brought about a rejection of Classical motifs by artists, which were replaced by historical realism, concentrating on the dress, customs, and settings of the Middle Ages. Inspiration for such compositions was drawn from provinces which artists thought were evocative of this age, economically backward provinces such as Brittany. Although Romantic landscapes were largely of sublime subjects, moving away from Neoclassical representations of Arcadian

scenes, the writings of Rousseau maintained a taste for the pastoral. Honour, H. (1979) Romanticism. Allen Lane (London), p.60.

[6] p.40 LePaul, J. {with C.-G. LePaul} (1987) Gauguin and the Impressionists at Pont-Aven. Abbeville Press (New York).

[7] p.46 Brettell and Brettell Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century.

[8] Pissarro quoted in Brettell and Brettell Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century. p.49.

[9] Gauguin's initial renderings of Brittany were tentative, painted en plein air in the Impressionist style. By the time of his return in 1888, however, he had started drawing from memory, and had introduced a simpler style, derived from his experiences with cloisonné decoration of his ceramic works, learnt from Ernest Chaplet. p.34 in Thomson, B. (1983) Gauguin and 'Post-Impressionism.' The Open University Press (Milton Keynes).

[10]Gauguin was continually looking to develop his own style of painting. When an economic down turn forced him to leave the Bourse in 1883, the family moved to Rouen, but found economic conditions there equally as depressed. Six months later the family moved to Copenhagen, where Gauguin gained employment as a representative of a textiles firm, Dilles & Co. He was still greatly interested in painting, and although his work and his isolation from Paris meant that he was unable to do much painting himself, this did not stop his mind from turning to such matters.

Gauguin wrote to his friend Schuffenecker in January 1885, setting forth the aesthetic creed that he developed at this time;

a great emotion can be translated immediately; dream over it and look for its simplest form....I infer that there are noble lines, false lines, etc.; a straight line expresses infinity, a curve limits creation.....Some tones are noble, others common; some harmonies are quiet and cheering, others excite you by their boldness....The further I go, the more I feel sure that thoughts can be expressed by something quite different from literature.

Gauguin quoted on p.9-10, of Leymarie, J. (1960) Paul Gauguin: Water colours, pastels and drawings in colour. Faber & Faber (London).

In 1885, frustrated with his job, and the puritan lifestyle that his wife Mette's family followed, he returned to Paris, with his son Clovis. Between 1885 and 1886 in Paris despite his financial difficulties, Gauguin began to develop his own style, based on the aesthetic creed he had developed. This involved using a limited range of colours, and trying to capture the essence of what he was portraying. This differed significantly from the traditional methods of the Impressionists, who used a wide range of colours, in an attempt to capture a fleeting moment. He began to use stronger lines, tighter composition, and tonal contrasts to create a rhythm for his pictures.

Leymarie Paul Gauguin, p.10.

[11] It was noted by an English traveller, in the 1890's, that the locals treated all strangers, be they English or French, as foreigners. Braudel, F. (1986) The Identity of France. Volume 2: People and Production. Collins (London), p.45.

[12] Braudel describes how the arrangement of communities in Brittany affected the lives of peasants;

The Armorican massif in Brittany consists of a patchwork of hedged fields (champs clos), with isolated houses standing in properties of varying size, surrounded by raised dykes planted with trees. These basic units once drew primarily on their own resources: not so long ago, the peasants made not only their farm implements but their clothes and even shoes. At the same time, there would always be a central hamlet or village.

Braudel, F. (1988) Identity of France: Volume 1: History and Environment. Collins (London), p.135.

Before the introduction of mettled roads, the isolation of these communities was a great hindrance to the dissemination of urban influences in Brittany. The isolation of outlying farms is conveyed in Alain Croix's history of Brittany;

In mid-nineteenth-century...in the huge parishes of inland Cornouaille, to travel from outlying farms to the bourg (central village) and back meant a day's journey in the bad season, so greatly was progress hindered by the pot-holes in the road.

Alain Croix, La Bretagne aux XVIe et XVIIe siécles I, 1981, quoted in Braudel Identity of France: Volume 1, p.23.

[13] p.78 in Weber, E. (1977) Peasants into Frenchmen. Chatto & Windus (London), in which Weber charts the process of the modernisation of rural France, from the start of the Franco-Prussian War, until the beginning of the Great War.

[14] Indeed, as Weber highlights, in parts of Morbihan and Côtes-du-Nord, priests still preached in Breton, and teachers had to be supplied with dictionaries. p.82 Weber Peasants into Frenchmen.

[15] The national government tried to ban preaching in Breton, and in 1902, it had to suspend the salaries of a substantial number of priests who refused to comply. Weber contends, however, that the Church was not the instigator of any regionalist movements, rather it merely reflected regional trends. Weber Peasants into Frenchmen. p.88.

All in all, as far as language was concerned

Brittany was a compact island, virtually closed to the French language: sermons were preached in Breton, even in the towns: village schools, when they existed, taught children to read (rarely to write) only in the Breton language, with occasionally a little Latin.

p.116 in Braudel Identity of France: Volume I

[16] Loughlin, J.P. (1992) "The Algerian War and 'The One and Indivisible French Republic. 'The Algerian War and 'the One and Indivisible French Republic.'" pp.149-160, p.149, in Hargreaves, A.G. & Heffernan, M.J. [eds.] French and Algerian Identities from Colonial Times to the Present: A Century of Interaction. Mellon (Toronto).

The downfall of the Ancien Régime was seen by many, as partly a result of its failure to overcome the regional autonomist tendencies that were present within the country. The Jacobins, therefore, were far more forthright in their attempts at assimilation, with the creation of *la nation* being their primary objective. For the Jacobins, to be part of the French nation entailed the adoption of French culture and language. Loughlin "The Algerian War." p.149.

Since it emerged in Europe, the nation state has attempted, through the use of a common language, religion, historical myths, symbols, and allegiances, to promote a single identity. Cosgrove, D. (1990) "...Then We Take Berlin. Cultural Geography, 1989-90." Unpublished Draft.

[17] p.489 of Weber Peasants into Frenchmen.

[18] Weber maintains that the army was a major agent in the assimilation of Breton culture into French. Weber Peasants into Frenchmen p.299. The army provided conscripts with at least a rudimentary understanding of French, and broadened their perspectives beyond those of their local pays.

The schools were another important component of the process of assimilation. In 1880, Rector Baudoin of Rennes, wrote of the need to spread the number of schools throughout the Breton peninsula, so as to "truly unify the peninsula with the rest of France and complete the historical annexation always ready to dissolve." Quoted in Weber, p.313. Although children's' understanding of French was often rudimentary, it was reinforced by the prohibition of the use of the Breton language within schools, paralleling the French government's attempt to ban the use of Breton in worship.

Minstrels and bards, who, before literacy became widespread, were an important means of communicating urban influences, and recording history and myths, survived into the 1880s, but were giving way before the advance of the railways, and of literacy, and when French finally penetrated Brittany, it was from the urban centres, and along the newly built railways and mettled roads. Braudel Identity of France: Volume I p.218. The creation of efficient communications accelerated the assimilation of Brittany into France.

[19] p.50 of Bertho, C. (1980) "L'invention de la Bretagne genese sociale d'un stéréotype." Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales. 35, pp.45-63.

[20] p.58 Thomson, B. (1987) Gauguin. Thames & Hudson (London).

[21] Gauguin's reference to the originality of *Breton Girls Dancing*, may have been somewhat self-conscious, as in fact it was rather reminiscent of Degas' work. The painting, painted in the bold fluid strokes that were inherited from his work in Martinique, shows three young Breton girls

dancing in a round in a recently (judging from the piles of hay scattered around the field) harvested field. All three girls are shown to be traditionally clad, wearing distinctive coiffs, black dresses, aprons, and sabots. The work shows an Impressionist treatment, and conveys a relaxed and graceful feel that belies Gauguin's inexperience in conveying movement. It is one of his few works to depict a moving subject. The background is the Derout field, which covers the hill behind the church of Pont-Aven. The bell tower of the church is included in the painting. This scene was used as a background in several other paintings by Gauguin. p.94 The Art of Paul Gauguin.

[22] Letter to Theo van Gogh, mid June 1888, from Merhlès, V. [ed.] (1984) Correspondence de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888. Editions Signac (Paris).

[23] p.82 of Weber, Peasants Into Frenchmen.

[24] Weber, Peasants Into Frenchmen. p.100.

[25] p.52 Bertho,. "L'invention de la Bretagne" The cabaret songs of Montemarte such as *Ma Doueé Beniguet*, and *Ils ont des chapeux ronde*, by Botrel are indicative of this. At around the same time, a character called Bécassine, a satire on the Breton peasant, appeared in *La Semaine de Suzette*. Bertho attributes this change of emphasis to the moving away from literary means of representation, towards media of mass communication, and the consequent change from a bourgeois, to a mass audience. She contends that such negative portrayals were designed to assuage any doubts held by first generation migrants, from the countryside to the city, and that such representations were not peculiar to Brittany.

[26] p.52 Brettell and Brettell Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century.

[27] Gauguin, P. (1952) Intimate Journals. translated by Van Wyck Brooks, preface by Emile Gauguin. William Heinemann Ltd. (London), p.118.

[28] Nochlin, L. (1983) "The Imaginary Orient." Art in America. 17 pp.119-191, p.122.

[29] See p124 Nochlin "The Imaginary Orient."

[30] Brettell and Brettell Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century. p.67.

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[31] Quoted in Brettell and Brettell Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century. p.52.

[32] p.117 Moulin, A. {translated by M.C. & M.F. Cleary} (1991) Peasantry and Society in France since 1789. Cambridge University Press (Cambridge).

[33] Moulin Peasantry and Society in France p.122.

[34] Freches-Thory, C. (1988) "Brittany, 1886-1890." in The Art of Paul Gauguin, p.54.

[35] Cambry wrote of Pont-Aven, during his tour of the department of Finistére in 1794;

The commune that goes by this name lies five-quarter leagues from the coast. This little seaport is the most capricious of resorts, if you will pardon this Italian expression. It is situated in the water, on the rocks, at the foot of two lofty hills, scattered with enormous weathered blocks of granite, which look as if they might come crashing down at any moment. They serve as gable ends for the cottages, as walls for the small gardens. These rocks, which have fallen from the mountain, obstruct the course of the river, which leaps over so many obstacles. The mills on the riverbanks make use of them to support the axles of the mill wheels. They are linked by wooden bridges. The hillsides around are wooded, uniquely varied, an extraordinary sight. The noise of the water, the rush of twenty waterfalls deafens the visitor like the fullers' mill in Don Quixote, like the waterfalls of Switzerland and Savoy...The environs of Pont-Aven, the town especially, could provide a hundred bizarre subjects for the sketcher who chose to study it.

p.35-36 of an official report commissioned by the then Government of France, Cambry (1794) Voyages dans le Finistère. (Paris), quoted in LePaul Gauguin and the Impressionists., p.51.

[36] Trollope, T.A. (1840) A Summer in Brittany. Volume 1, p.4 (London). Quoted in Freches-Thory The Art of Paul Gauguin, p.54.

[37] LePaul Gauguin and the Impressionists., p.53.

[38] Blackburn described Pont-Aven as follows:-

At a point where the River Aven, breaking through its narrow channel, dashing under bridges and turning numerous water-wheels spreads out into a broad estuary, is the little port of Pont-Aven, built four miles from the sea. The majority of the houses are of granite, and sheltered under wooded hills; the water rushes past flour-mills and under bridges with perpetual noise, and a breeze stirs the poplar trees that line its banks on the calmest day. The widest part of the village is the Place....A small community of farmers, millers, fisherman and peasant-women, is its native population, supplemented in summer by a considerable foreign element

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Blackburn, H. (1880) Breton Folk, An Artistic Tour in Brittany. Illustrated by R. Caldecott. (London), quoted on p.17 of Freches-Thory The Art of Paul Gauguin.

[39] Gauguin Intimate Journals, p.106

[40] Bertho "L'invention de la Bretagne" p67.

[41] Blackburn, quoted on p.17 of Freches-Thory The Art of Paul Gauguin.

Blackburn's guide mentions the Pension Gloanec, which the Pont-Aven School made its base. From his description, however, it is plain that the pension was attracting artists for a number of years before their arrival. It attracted some well known artists, and was tuned in to the demands of the Paris market, and the stylistic developments of the capital, being a summer outpost for Salon artists:-

....down by the bridge (is), a quaint little auberge (with a signboard painted by one of the inmates), the Pension Gloanec. This is the true Bohemian home of Pont-Aven.... Here the panels of the rooms are also decorated with works of art, and here, in the evening and morning, seated round a table in the road, dressed in the easy bourgeois fashion of the country, may be seen artists whose names we need not print, but many of whose works are known over the world....At this little inn...the traveller need not be surprised to find that the conversation at table is of the Paris Salon, to find bedrooms and lofts turned into studios, and a pervading smell of oil paint..

Gauguin's first visit to Brittany was in 1886. It may have been the position of Brittany in the popular imagination, that first attracted Gauguin to Brittany, but it seems more likely that it was economic considerations that led to his visits there. Struggling to meet the high cost of living in

Paris, through the irregular income he received from his painting, he was looking for somewhere where the cost of living was low. As he wrote to his estranged wife in August of 1885;

If I sell several paintings, next summer I'll go to the cosy inn in Brittany and live cheaply. Brittany's still the place where you can live most economically.

Letter to Mette Gauguin, (Dieppe (?) Wednesday 19th August 1885); in Merhlès, V. [ed.] (1984) <u>Correspondence de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888.</u> Editions Signac (Paris).

In another letter to his wife, written the following July, he amplified this;

What a shame we didn't come to live in Brittany before. The hotel costs 75F per month, full board. The food makes you instantly fatter. There's a house with a stable, workshop, and garden. I'm sure a family could live here comfortably for 300F a month.

Letter to Mette Gauguin, (Vers 25th July 1886); Merlhès, <u>Correspondence de Paul Gauguin</u>..

Despite the fact that the Pont-Aven School may be seen as tourists, this did not hinder Gauguin displaying his contempt for holiday makers, in a letter to Bernard;

....you are at St. Briac - by your father's orders, which also forbid you to come to Pont-Aven. You are not losing much anyhow, as Pont-Aven is full of objectionable trippers.

Letter to Émile Bernard (undated, Le Pouldu, August 1889): from Malingue, M. [ed.] (1948) <u>Paul Gauguin: Letters to his Wife and Friends.</u> Saturn Press (London).

Whatever his reasons for staying in Brittany, Gauguin found the province to be conducive to his painting, both in terms of living conditions, and suitable subjects. In addition, being away from Paris made it a lot easier for him to assume the rôle of the great artist, he felt himself to be;

I'm working frequently and fruitfully here; although I don't earn any more for it, I'm treated with respect for being the best painter in Pont-Aven. However, perhaps this augurs well for the future. Anyway, I've got a respectable reputation from it and everyone here (Americans, English, Swedish, French) fights for my advice that I'm stupid enough to give; in the last analysis we are used without fair credit.

To Mette Gauguin, (Pont-Aven, end of July 1886), Malingue, Paul Gauguin: Letters to his Wife and Friends.

[42] Orton, F. and Pollock, G. (1980) "Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prarie de la Représentation." Art History 3 pp. 314-344., p.337.

[43] These paid close attention to detail of the dress costume of the peasantry, whilst ignoring most, if not all details of their everyday life. In any case, these dress costumes have been shown by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, not to be as old as they are commonly assumed to be, but rather to date largely from the nineteenth-century. Interest in the costume book genre, alongside the new costumes that they portrayed, developed out of the economic and demographic expansion of the countryside, as much as from the growing interest in folklore and regional culture, which resulted from the perceived extinction of traditional rural society;

indeed, to a certain extent, as part of an interest in creating a picturesque past for these 'noble savages,' thought to be the ancestors of the urban bourgeoisie who bought and delighted in the printed and painted costume studies.

Brettell and Brettell Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth-century. p. 67.

[44] p.225 of Weber Peasants Into Frenchmen. Clan or locality came to be signified by minute details in design. Skirts, bodices and coiffes became the main elements of female dress. The subdivisions implied to Bretons by dress, seem to have been lost to outsiders, who seemed to see such costumes as uniform, and as a sign of rural otherness.

[45] Denvir, B. (1992) Post-Impressionism. Thames and Hudson (London), p.96.

[46] Quoted in of Chassé, C. (1969) The Nabis and their Period. Lund Humphries (London).

[47] An interesting debate in art history is whether to attribute the invention of cloissionism to Bernard or Gauguin. It will be interesting to consider this point for a short while, as it helps emphasis the importance of style over content of the paintings produced by the Pont-Aven School. Bernard thought that Vision After The Sermon was a copy of his canvas Breton Women in a Meadow, which he had completed earlier that year;

The 'Pardon' had just been held at Pont-Aven, and I, taking this local custom as my theme, had deliberately painted in yellow a sunlit field, illuminated with Breton bonnets and blue-black groups. Taking my painting as his starting point, Gauguin did The Vision After The Sermon, *a picture in which the bonnets became the main theme, as in mine. He defined his foreground against a deliberately red backdrop, in which two wrestlers, borrowed from a set of Japanese prints, were deployed to represent a vision. A new technique. This flat-tinted painting was so different from the previous work of Paul Gauguin that it amounted to a complete negation of it; and it was so similar to my own* Bretonnes dans la prairie *as to be practically identical.*

Bernard 1903, quoted on p.679-680 in The Art of Paul Gauguin.

It was not until Bernard's arrival, and his subsequent painting of Breton Women in a Meadow that Gauguin painted Vision After the Sermon, which has been widely proclaimed as his break through piece. Bernard undoubtedly influenced Gauguin's painting, and his development of cloissionism, but his painting does not have the religious symbolist qualities which make Gauguin's canvas so important. It is significant that Bernard had not claimed to have painted Breton Women in a Meadow at the Pont-Aven 'Pardon', until 1903, when he also changed the name of the work to Breton Women at a Pardon, to imbue the painting with a more religious theme, perhaps so as to give more credence to his claims to have influenced Gauguin.

Perhaps the whole argument can be put in perspective by reference to the opinion of the critic Fénéon, who gave the credit to Bernard for the invention of cloissionism, but credit to Gauguin for its successful development. The week before Gauguin departed to Tahiti, for the first time, Fénéon published an article, in which he asserted;

M. Bernard was the first to paint those disturbing, distorted Breton peasant women, set in fields of saturated colour, lacking atmosphere and contrast, and outlined as in leaded windows....When M. Gauguin came back from Brittany....he excelled in those Breton women of M. Bernard, but, being a more experienced painter, he put some logic into their awkwardness, and so his 'barbarism', parading as a wild thing, was really quite regimented....

May 20th 1891, Quoted on p.220 of Halperin, J. V. (1988) Félix Fénéon: Aesthete & Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris. Yale University Press (New Haven).

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[48] Albert Aurier's article, *Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin*, published in *Mercure de France* in March 1891, gave sole credit to Gauguin for the invention of synthetism and cloissonism. It was in large part responsible for a major rift that developed between Gauguin and Bernard, who felt that he had not received the credit that he was due. For his part, Gauguin felt that Bernard was trying to claim credit for his own work;

There was once a time when the only pictures of mine that could be sold were those I had given away. A good little fellow, to whom I had given thirty, hastened to sell them at Vollard's - after he had copied and studied them. To excuse himself he spread it about that it was I who had stolen all his studies....Excellent young man!

P.Gauguin Intimate Journals. ,p.99.

[49] In *Breton Women in a Meadow* Bernard had treated his subjects with almost caricatural simplification, using cloissonnist outlines. His composition was deliberate strange, with his figures spread across a uniform green background, with no use of depth or perspective. The important difference between this work and *Vision After the Sermon* is that that work held an air of mystic piety, whereas Bernard's work portrayed a holiday-like atmosphere. The figures, all joined so as to form one mass, are predominantly female, and dressed in Breton costume. Unusually for a representation of Breton peasants, a couple of men, dressed in traditional costume, are present towards the left of the painting. All of the figures in the painting, some of whom are seated, some of whom are standing, are conversing in groups of two or three. Orton and Pollock "Les Données Bretonnantes", p.335.

[50] Orton and Pollock "Les Données Bretonnantes", p.339.

[51] p.282 of Hélias, P.-J. (1975) The Horse of Pride. Yale University Press (New Haven).

Images of Breton Catholicism

I saw the primitive world. Before 1830, ancient times were still alive in Brittany.... Paganism lurked behind the peoples' veneer of Christianity.

The Breton Ernest Renan wrote this description of his native Province, in *La prière sur l'Acropole.*[1] The teachings of the Catholic Church were observed more consistently in Brittany than elsewhere in France, in the late nineteenth-century. Even so, the province had been mixing strict observance of the rules of worship laid down by the Vatican, with its own form of popular worship, since well before the start of the nineteenth-century. Catholicism in Brittany was founded on the pagan roots of the Druidic religions that the Celts had introduced to the peninsula. These pagan roots were still detectable in the practices of the Catholic Church in Brittany, right up until the nineteenth-century.

Catholicism as Spectacle

During the nineteenth-century, it was commonplace to see Brittany as a picturesque, remote corner of France, with traditional, pious, and superstitious peasants. Writers from Flaubert in 1847, to Pierre Loti in the 1880s, built up this picture, and in addition, many submissions were made to the Salon on Breton themes. These ranged from landscapes, for instance H. Harpignies *Calvary Outside a Breton Church,* which was submitted in 1885, to figurative works, which portrayed their subjects in the minutest detail, such as Dagnan-Bouveret's *Pardon in Brittany* (1887). Such representations may be seen as setting Breton religious festivities as spectacles to be consumed by metropolitan France.

The banning of the Catholic Church during the Revolution caused the Church a number of practical difficulties. Amongst these was the creation of a generation for whom it was not normal practice regularly to attend formal worship. Another

equally pressing problem was that the supply of aspirants to the priesthood slowed, and the means to train them diminished. During the Revolution, all of the Church's Seminaries were confiscated by the State. This led the Catholic Church to seek recruits from new areas. Gibson contends that the clergy of the nineteenth-century was largely drawn from the peasantry, unlike that of the Ancien Régime, when the clergy were mainly recruited from the urban nobility.

One impact of the increased prominence of the peasantry, within the Church, coupled with the decline in levels of church attendance, was an increasing tolerance of popular religious practices. At the start of the nineteenth century, however, popular religion, local informal and unsupervised worship, was anathema to the Tridentine clergy. In 1834, for instance, one Rennes priest disparagingly described such practices;

> *assembling on certain days at various supposedly miraculous springs; making a circuit of the spring on one's knees; washing hands, arms or eyes therein amid ridiculous contortions, or paying a few old beldames to carry out these pious farces on one's behalf.*[2]

As more peasants entered the clergy, attitudes towards popular religion became more relaxed. This new attitude may be illustrated by the remarks of one priest, made in 1863;

> *these abuses, the fruit of ignorance, show an instinct for religion rather than an absence of faith*[3]

The new found respectability of popular religion was accompanied by an upsurge in the production of popular religious art, especially the cheap and vividly coloured plaster statuary produced around the Paris church of Saint-Sulpice. Religious statuary was a common sight in the French countryside, particularly in Brittany, at

road-side shrines. Gauguin may have been influenced by the bright colours used to decorate the plaster icons, and by the wayside statues of Brittany, in producing his representations of Breton Catholicism. The representations that Gauguin produced, of Breton Catholicism, are the paintings that first won him recognition as a great artist. The *Volpini Exhibition*, at which they were first shown, received very favourable reviews.[4] They were also the last canvasses he produced of the Province.[5]

Yellow Christ and *Breton Calvary (Green Christ)*, take representations of religious statues, and transpose them against Breton landscapes, at a scale where they would appear life size alongside the Breton subjects which were included. The effect of this was to produce an ambiguous relationship between the two elements. The religious statues are present in a Breton landscape on two levels, as representations of statues, and as representations of Christ. [6]

The autumn landscape that forms the backdrop of *Yellow Christ* [Plate 18] is a representation of the hill of Sainte-Marguerite, which overlooks Pont-Aven, which Gauguin could see from the window of his studio. The figure of Christ on the cross was inspired by a seventeenth century Crucifix [Plate 19], made of polychromed wood, which may still be seen on the left side of the nave in the small chapel of Trémalo, near Pont-Aven [Plate 20].

Green Christ [Plate 21] was based on a sandstone crucifixion scene, which Gauguin discovered near the church at Nizon, a neighbouring village [Plate 22]. This picture was painted at around the same time as *Yellow Christ*. The landscape that forms the background of *Green Christ*, is a representation of a landscape at Le Pouldu, and the figures in the background may be seen gathering seaweed. By placing these crucifixion scenes in a nineteenth-century, working Breton landscape, it might be argued that Gauguin is attempting to show that, for him, Catholicism was central to everyday Breton life.

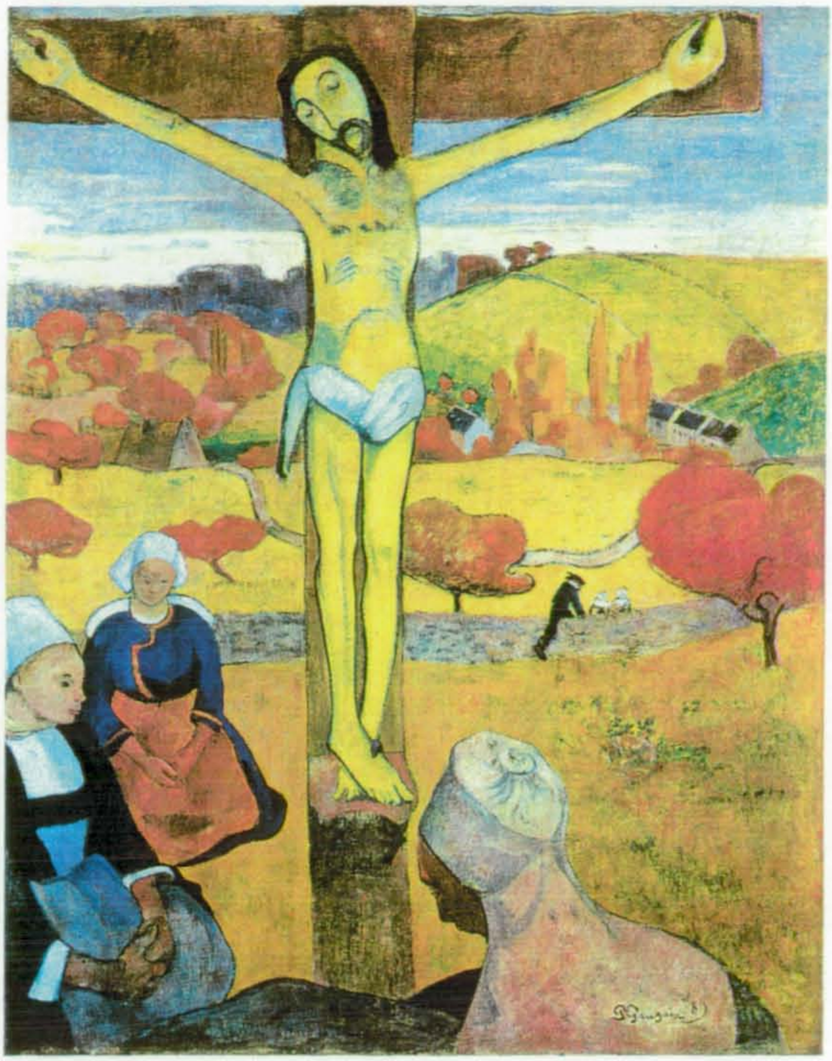


Plate 18: *Yellow Christ*, Paul Gauguin.

1889. Oil on canvas. Albright-Kox Art Gallery, Buffalo.



Plate 19: Trémalo Chapel, postcard, 1895.

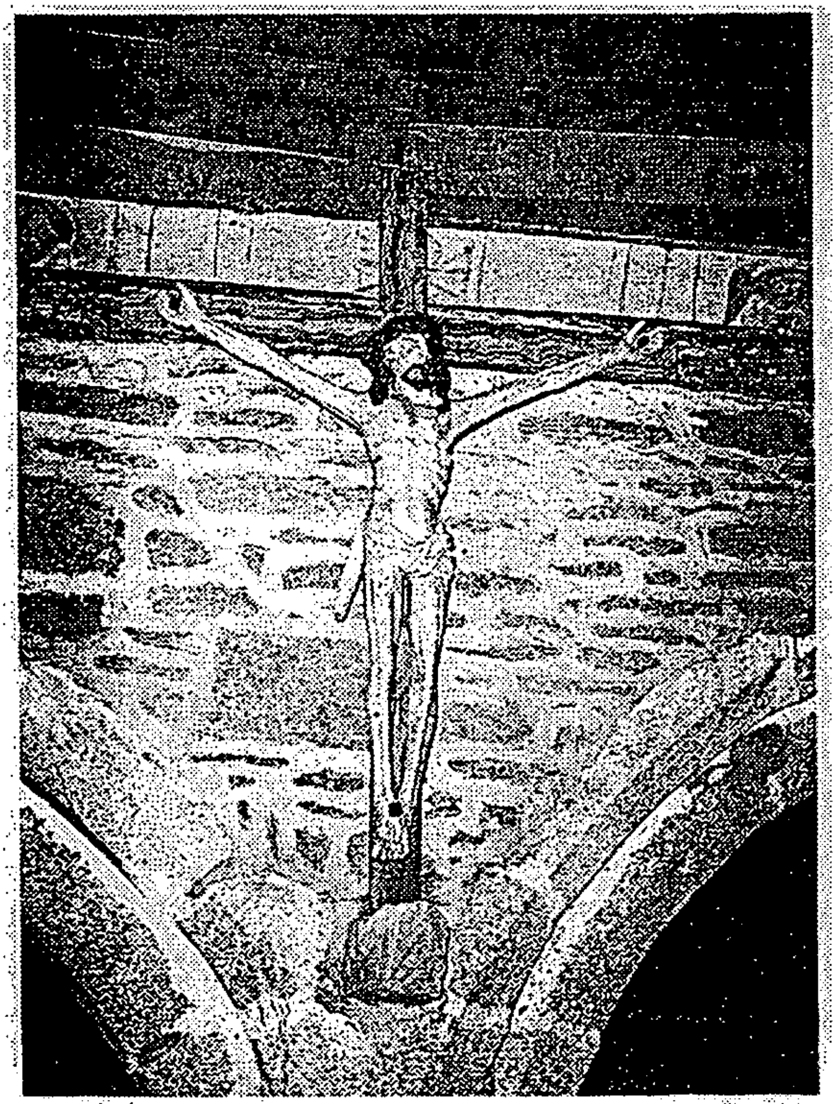


Plate 20: Seventeenth century statue of Christ at Trémalo Chapel.

Gauguin's representation of Christ was symbolic rather than literal.[7] By representing a statue of Christ, Gauguin may be thought of as attempting to convey the nature of Breton piety, rather than drawing some Biblical allegory. He was attempting to communicate the hold that Catholicism held over Breton society. This he attempted to achieve by placing the Calvary in a working Breton landscape.

One of the most pronounced forms that popular religion took was the increasing Marian devotion that occurred throughout the nineteenth-century.[8] Perhaps the most extreme outlet given to this devotion was the series of Marian apparitions that occurred across France, in the second half of the nineteenth-century.[9]

In Brittany popular religion generally took the form of a pardon, a pilgrimage to a local chapel or shrine that was held to have some miraculous power. Such celebrations tended to be a liberal mixture of the sacred and the profane, as Hélias describes;

> *A pardon is the annual festival held for the patron saint of a church or a chapel, some of which are most especially revered because of the indulgences granted and the curés that take place.*[10]

Pardons, Breton pilgrimages to local chapels, were increasingly exploited as tourist attractions in the late nineteenth-century, and had already been adopted as a theme by Salon artists, such as Breton, Leleux, and Dagnon-Bouveret.[11] Paintings such as *Breton Women at a Pardon* [Plate 23], by Dagnon-Bouveret, tended to concentrate on the costumes worn by the Breton people at religious festivals, rather than trying to examine the nature of the festivals themselves.

Vision After the Sermon [Plate 24] and *Breton Women in a Meadow* may be seen as a continuation of this genre. *Vision After the Sermon* differs, however, in depicting an apparition.[12] Such a subject fitted in with the Symbolism that Gauguin



Plate 21: Sandstone Calvary at Nizon.

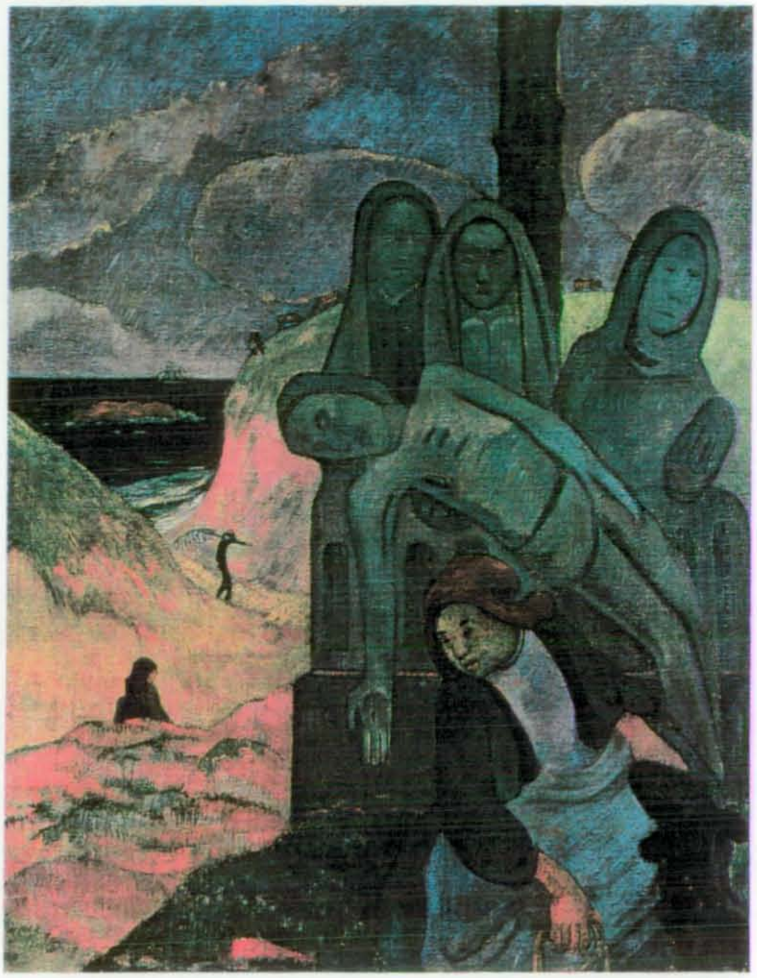


Plate 22: *Breton Calvary (Green Christ),* Paul Gauguin.

1889. Oil on canvas. Musées Royeaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

was helping to develop, and may also be seen in the context of the Marian apparitions.

Gauguin wrote to van Gogh on *Vision After the Sermon*;

> *I think I have achieved great simplicity in the figures, very rustic, very superstitious-the overall effect is very severe-the cow under the tree is tiny in comparison with reality, and is rearing up-for me in this painting the landscape and the fight only exist in the imagination of the people praying after the sermon, which is why there is a contrast between the people, who are natural, and the struggle going on in a landscape which is unnatural and out of proportion.*

In the fact that Gauguin thought he had achieved a rustic, superstitious simplicity in these figures, we seem to find confirmation that Gauguin was aping the Salon artists in representing Brittany as a preserve of tradition, and primitivism in an otherwise modernising, metropolitan France. In large part Gauguin concentrated on technical details in this letter.[13] This would suggest that Gauguin's main interest lay in the stylistic development this picture represented, rather than its subject.

Vision After the Sermon earned Gauguin the contempt of Camile Pissarro, who in a letter to his son Lucien, criticised the painting for

> *not applying his (Gauguin's) synthesis to our modern, completely social, anti-authoritarian and anti-mystical philosophy. Therein lies the crux of the problem. This is a step backward. Gauguin is not a visionary, but a shrewd character who has sensed the bourgeoisie's backward trend, in reaction to the grand sense of solidarity that is germinating among the common people-as yet unconscious but powerful, and supremely legitimate!*[14]



Plate 23: *Breton Women at a Pardon*, Pascal Dagnon-Bouveret.

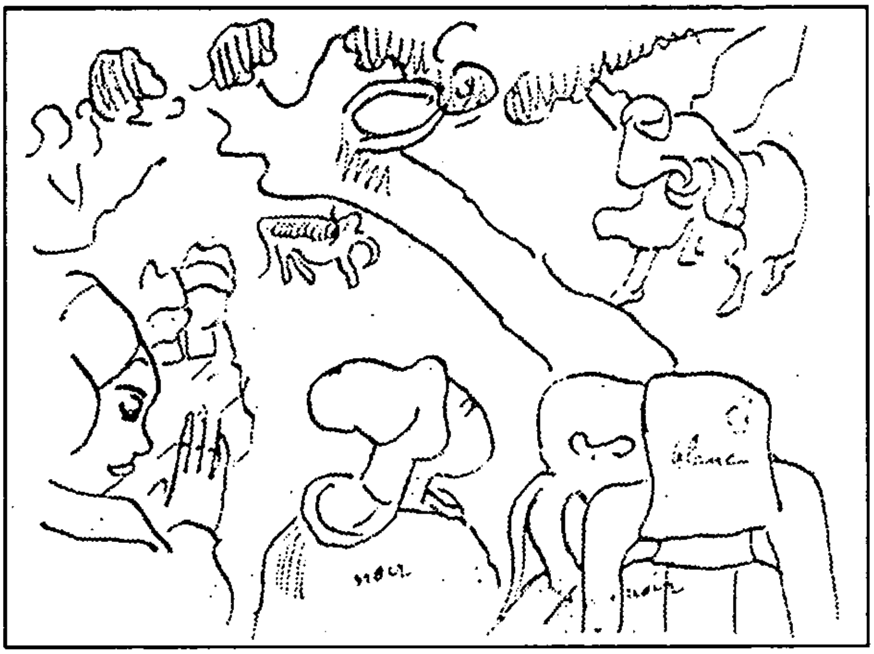


Plate 24: Sketch for *Vision After The Sermon*,
from a letter to Vincent van Gogh, Pont-Aven 22 September 1888.

Breton Catholic Identity

The Catholic Church of late nineteenth-century France was a Church undergoing a period of change. As Gibson highlights, levels of attendance at Easter communion, had been in decline for much of the nineteenth-century. This decline in piety was particularly marked amongst men, and in urban areas. The nature of worship was also undergoing a sea-change, with the Church relaxing its insistence on formal, clergy-led worship, in favour of more popular forms of religious celebration.

Levels of Church attendance held up better in many rural areas of France, especially to the south and west of the country. As a result of this, the peasantry came to be viewed as more pious than the urban proletariat. The stability of the peasant, and his moral superiority over his urban counterpart was attested to by a rural curé, based in the diocese of Nantes, who wrote in 1875;

> *The man of the fields hears only the voice of the humble curé of his village calling on him to serve God, and the voices of the heavens and the earth which tell His glory. More religious, he is also more moral, and instead of devoting himself to chimerical ambitions, the popular plague of our time, he is sober and restrained in his desires and his wishes do not extend beyond extending by a few yards the borders of his field.*[15]

Elements of the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth-century continued an eighteenth-century tradition of being indifferent or hostile to Catholicism, but after the June Days of 1848, they increasingly turned towards the Church as a tool of social control of the proletariat and peasantry. There remained, however, latent hostility towards the Church.[16]

Rural France was viewed as being the area where the traditions of the Catholic Church were most likely to be preserved. Even so, the faith was thought to be in danger in the countryside, from the urban influences that were spreading to there towards the end of the nineteenth-century.[17] Brittany was one area of rural France where observance of the Catholic faith was maintained at particularly high levels. The nature of Breton Catholicism played a part in maintaining such high levels of worship.

The Catholic Church in Brittany was an institution many Bretons felt belonged to the Province as opposed to the French republic;

> *the school, which belonged to the Republic, spoke French, whereas the Church, which was White, spoke Breton.*[18]

This sense of ownership was partly founded on the pagan Celtic traditions that had been appropriated by the Catholic Church in Brittany. In his account of early twentieth century Breton life, remembered from his childhood, Pierre-Jacque Hélias describes a Brittany in which superstition was rife. For instance, he describes how curés were often viewed as magicians.[19] To the mind of many of the urban bourgeoisie the Bretons' faith took on a somewhat superstitious mantle;

> *Breton Catholicism was characterised by a taste for the mystical and the irrational, and above all by an obsession with death; the world of the dead was an integral part of that of the living, and the legendary Ankou, a kind of incarnate Grim Reaper, was a very real figure in the Breton mind. Breton piety was profound, and capable of great sacrifices.*[20]

In the painting *Green Christ*, painted in 1889, Gauguin superimposes a Breton sandstone Calvary on to a Breton landscape, arguably attempting to achieve a

number of things. Firstly this gives the painting a sombre air, by virtue of the sandstone's dark green colouration. The severity of the painting reflects an element of melancholia and dread. Gauguin may be seen to be attempting to represent a Breton faith that he saw as sincere, melancholic, rooted in the land and poverty of the province, but based on blind faith. This is conveyed in the notes he wrote on the back of a calling card he left with the critic Albert Aurier;

> *Calvary /cold stone /of the soil - Breton idea /of the sculptor who explains religion through his Breton soul with Breton costumes - Breton local colour / passive sheep/ and on the right....sad to do / In opposition (the human shape) / poverty, etc.*[21]

Whether the Breton was genuinely pious, or adhered to the Catholic faith through superstition and ignorance, was a matter of some debate amongst nineteenth-century French theologians. For instance, a Breton, commenting upon his own population, observed that the only way;

> *to move such an almost savage populace....[was with] A voice like thunder, dire threats, fists belabouring the pulpit, sweat running down his cheeks, the eloquent pastor fills his hearers with delicious terror.*[22]

Gauguin displayed negative feelings towards the Church. Although many observers felt that Gauguin held some form of faith, he questioned the existence of a deity in his *Intimate Journals*;

> *Why do you also maintain that God is the creator of everything? If only for an instant, could not God have arranged things differently? A strange sort of Almighty!*[23]

Gauguin became very critical in later life of what he saw as a Church based on the practice of exploiting peoples' superstitions and ignorances. Gauguin believed that this was subverting the original message of the Church;

> *The Gospel ....seems to foresee the future with extreme lucidity, and never ceases to warn us against a Church that will not be based on Reason and Science. It urges simplicity, even poverty, contempt for riches.*[24]

In light of his attitudes his religious representations may be seen as satires on more conventional religious art. In 1891, the critic Octave Mirbeau described *Yellow Christ* [Plate 25]:

> *In a completely yellow landscape, a dying yellow....a pitiful and barbaric Christ is daubed in yellow. At the foot of the Calvary, some peasants are kneeling....The sadness of this wooden Christ is inexpressible....he seems to say to himself, seeing these miserable and ignorant creatures at his feet, 'what if my martyrdom has been in vain?*[25]

For a bourgeois metropolitan audience therefore, the painting seems to convey the notion of the Breton people as ignorant. Mirbeau has the peasants superstitiously grovelling at the foot of a crudely constructed idol. Read in these terms, both this painting and *Vision After the Sermon* may be seen as part of the derision that was levelled at Brittany towards the end of the nineteenth-century.

To view Gauguin's representations of Breton Catholicism as purely derogatory, would not tell the whole story. Gauguin's work may be viewed more sympathetically. There is a harmony between the naïve sculpture of Christ, that was the basis of *Yellow Christ*, the superstitious nature of the faith of the figures that

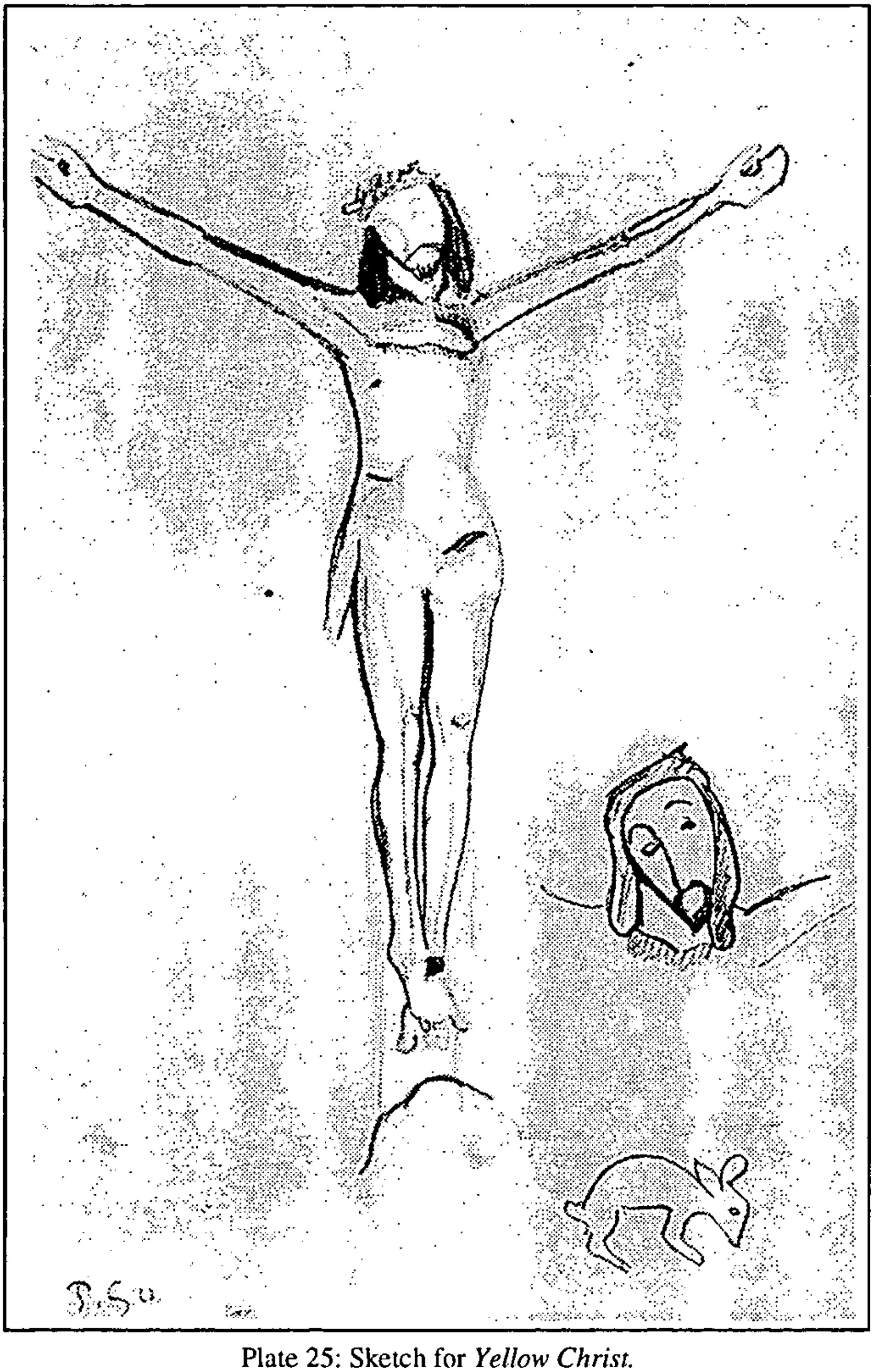


Plate 25: Sketch for *Yellow Christ.*

Gauguin was trying to portray, and the deliberately 'primitive' style that Gauguin employed. Octave Mirbeau wrote of the canvas, in the *Echo de Paris* as "A rich, disturbing blend of barbaric splendour, Catholic liturgy, Hindu reverie, Gothic imagery, obscure and subtle symbolism."[26]

Levels of observance remained higher amongst women than with men. The nineteenth-century Catholic Church played an ever decreasing rôle in the social life of men, what ever their position in society. Mass had traditionally been a place to socialise and do business, but for men this function was increasingly taken over by *le cabarets*, drinking clubs, as the nineteenth-century wore on. Such factors led to an increasing defection from the Church by men;

> *The confessor of a young woman can be simply defined, as the rival of the husband and his secret enemy....This man knows things about this woman that the husband has never found out in the long nights and days of intimacy....She too knows well that there is a master of her secret thoughts.*[27]

Yellow Christ is connected to *Vision After The Sermon* by a similar treatment of similar subjects.[28] The foreground of both paintings contain the same truncated Breton women, reduced to little more than a decorative bonnet. Indeed, the two women kneeling, on the left of *Yellow Christ*, are derived from figures in *Vision After The Sermon* [Plate 26]. As with other representations of Brittany, it is predominantly women who are portrayed. In these two paintings, it may be argued, this may well be connected with the increasing femininity associated with the Catholic Church, both in terms of observance, and of the growing Marian cult. Perhaps in attempting to distance himself from artists that chose to represent modern and mundane subjects, Gauguin pandered to a bourgeois audience, as Pissarro suggest, by choosing to depict rural Brittany in the same manner as Romantic artists. Gauguin was arguably partly responsible for perpetuating the

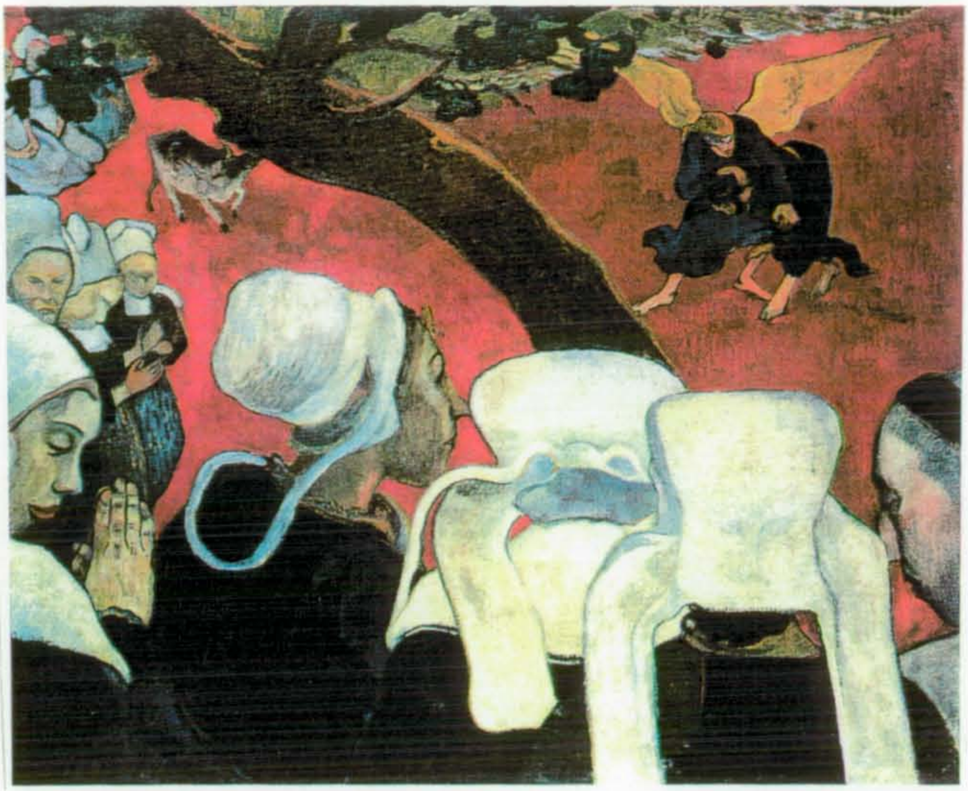


Plate 26: ***Vision After The Sermon*** **, Paul Gauguin.**

1888. Oil on canvas. The National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

fiction, largely set up for the consumption of the tourist, of Brittany as an indolent, Celtic backwater.

Catholicism as Other

By encapsulating its subject matter, it is contended that the picturesque is able to certify that it is different, backward, culturally inferior, "Other" than the constructor or consumer.[29] Nochlin, the author of this argument, maintains that Realist representations of Breton Catholic ceremonies, by Salon artists such as Jules Breton and Pascal Dagnon-Bouveret, represent such a portrayal. They were painted with photograph-like reality, which tended to lend a pseudo-ethnographical authenticity to their work. Such portrayals avoided any hint of identification with their subjects, symbolically not allowing the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the intended audience, any real level of insight into the actual lives of the people of Brittany.

A similar treatment may be observed in *The Seaweed Gatherers*. None of the figures present in the painting in anyway acknowledge the observer and as such the audience is not invited to identify with the subjects of the painting. The almost Asiatic face of the figure in the foreground of *The Seaweed Gatherers* would suggest that Gauguin was attempting to convey the alienness of the Breton people to his Parisian audience.

It is in his representations of religious themes that Gauguin most obviously represented Brittany as Other. Gauguin turned to Brittany for a distinctive subject within which he could develop a distinctive new style.[30] Although his later representations of the province were stylistically different from anything that had gone before, the actual subjects that he chose were not. In Brittany Gauguin "discovered"

> *an atmosphere and environment different from our ultra-civilised milieu, so that, in his works, he could return to primitive art*[31]

The supposed piety, and distinct nature of Breton Catholicism, would have assisted the Pont-Aven School in representing the Province as Other than metropolitan France. For instance, despite the fact that, during the nineteenth-century, they were drawn from the ranks of those that they preached to, the clergy were still supposed to be something other than of this world, as the 1880 statutes of the diocese of Montpellier declared;

> *the priest is not of the world. He cannot therefore desire it. The more he shows himself in public, the more he exposes himself to letting the human element in him show, and the less, as a result, he succeeds in inspiring respect for his character and affection for his person.*[32]

Gauguin's use of religious imagery in his representations of Brittany may be linked with the possibilities that it afforded the Symbolist painter. Post-Impressionism returned to academic painting's use of external references, something that Impressionism had divorced itself from.[33]

It seems doubtful that Gauguin's use of religious imagery derived from a conventional Catholic faith held on his part. Gauguin wrote extensively about his attitudes to the Church, during his time in the Marquis Islands, after the turn of the century. The extracts concerning Catholicism, contained within Gauguin's *Intimate Journals*, offer somewhat contradictory evidence on the artist's views on the Church. He seemed to hold the institution of the Church somewhat in contempt, whilst actually professing his belief in a faith that was a curious mixture of exotic philosophies and religions.[34]

In defining the techniques that were to constitute the style of the Pont-Aven School, Gauguin and Bernard sought inspiration in medieval art, and the art of

other cultures. From the mid Nineteenth-century writers such as William Morris defended medieval art.

Following the opening of Japan to Europe, Japanese art came to have a heavy influence on that of the West. The Universal Exhibitions of 1867 and 1878 saw a considerable Japanese presence, including exhibitions on the techniques involved in Japanese print making. Gauguin and Bernard were both influenced by the simplicity of these prints, and their use of bold, flat colours, and emphatic sinuous lines.[35]

For Gauguin, and other members of the Pont-Aven School, this presented source material from which to build a distinctive style of painting. Members of the School searched Brittany for aspects that were different to metropolitan France. Gauguin wrote to van Gogh late in 1889, on his representations of Bretons;

> *I try to infuse these desolate figures with the wildness that I see in them, and which is also in me. Here in Brittany the country people have something medieval about them; they don't look for a moment as though they believe that Paris exists, or that it is really 1889.*[36]

Gauguin remarked to van Gogh, about the Bretons that "The faces are almost Asiatic; they are yellow, triangular, and severe."[37] Thus the Bretons were identified as being Other than the metropolitan French, by referring to them in terms of the Orient, the new vogue in French art.

Children Wrestling [Plate 27], sketched a few months before *Vision After the Sermon* in July 1888, was painted by the river Aven, and displays a distinct Japanese influence, being derived from Hokusai's *Mangura* albums of 1815. He deliberately emphasised the 'primitive' nature of the painting through its crudity, for example the oversized feet of the children.[38] As Gauguin wrote to Schuffenecker;



Plate 27: Sketch for *Children Wrestling*.

> *The last one is of two kids fighting by the river - very Japanese for a wild Frenchman from Peru.*[39]

The two boys shown wrestling, a common enough pastime in Brittany, were later used as the model for the figures of Jacob and the Angel in *Vision After the Sermon*.

The Vision After The Sermon (Jacob Wrestling With The Angel) was begun in mid August of 1888 and completed by mid September. It combined the influence of Japanese woodcuts, medieval stained glass windows, medieval French prints, particularly *Images d'Epinal*, and the work of early Italian fresco painters.[40] The use of such antique, or foreign influences, in the context of a Breton subject, may again be seen as an attempt to portray the subject as Other than metropolitan France.

The critic Albert Aurier described *Vision After The Sermon*, in an article in the Parisian journal *Mercure de France* in 1891;

> *While these two legendary giants, transformed by distance into pygmies, fight their formidable battle, some naïve, interested women observe them, probably understanding little of what is happening over on that marvellous scarlet hill. They are peasants, and from the size of their white headdresses, spread wide like gulls' wings, the coloured patterns of their scarfs and the style of their clothes, we gather that they are from Brittany.*[41]

Aurier shows that for a contemporary urban audience, Gauguin's representations of Brittany did portray the province in a picturesque manner, and Other than metropolitan France. Aurier stresses the naïveté of the women. It is also interesting to note that Aurier identifies the women as Breton from their costume. This is

despite the fact that Gauguin has greatly simplified the details of the women's' clothing. It would seem that, even so, Gauguin had created a symbol that was readily identifiable to a metropolitan audience.

According to Thomson, however, aside from adopting a new style, Gauguin was no different to other artists, in that he portrayed Breton peasants as they were perceived to be in contemporary French society;

> *it was a widely held belief that the Bretons had somehow retained their primitive, Celtic character and that this was due to their harsh existence at the mercy of the elements, toiling at the unyielding granite rock of their peninsula.*[42]

In looking for the exotic it is perhaps surprising that Gauguin initially went only as far as Brittany, which was perceived as rigidly traditional, Royalist, and staunchly Catholic, in the Celtic tradition. Denvir claims that, in the Nineteenth-century, Brittany played the same rôle in France, as the Scottish Highlands did for Britain.[43] That is, it was both a wilderness against which urban society could contrast itself, as well as to which urban society could escape.

In a review of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, which appeared in *Mercure de France* in 1899, André Fontainas argued that the qualities that Gauguin was said to have sought in Brittany were a fiction, writing:

> *That M. Gauguin should have abandoned the too artificial simplicity of Brittany for his oceanic mirages is yet another proof of his complete sincerity. Out there on his enchanted island he is no longer concerned with the absurd mania for playing at the restoration of the great archaic romance of Brittany, so tedious after all.*[44]



Plate 28: Félix Fénéon, 1886.

Cogniat contends that Gauguin's paintings did not derive their primitive nature from the Breton subjects that he painted, rather that Gauguin found what he was looking for as much in himself, as in his Breton surroundings. As the critic Félix Fénéon [Plate 28] said, of the seventeen works that Gauguin showed at the 1889 *Café Volpini Exhibition*;

> *reality for him is only a pretext for far-reaching creations; he re-arranges the materials reality provides*[45]

The analysis that Said develops for Western attitudes to the Orient, may be adapted to metropolitan French attitudes towards Brittany. For Said, the Orient has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.[46] The Orient is represented as feminine, whilst the Occident is represented as masculine and dominant. In the last chapter, it was argued that a feminine stereotype was developed for Brittany. It might be argued that the Province experienced a similar relationship with France as that Said describes for the Orient.

Conclusion

Gauguin's representations of Breton Catholicism reflect the Symbolist style that he helped to develop in Brittany in 1888. In many ways, it is the Symbolist style that the Pont-Aven School defined in the summer of 1888, and beyond, that defined the School's representations of Breton Catholicism. The paintings represent various religious themes, and may be seen as implying that the Bretons were pious, superstitious, and somewhat backwards. Yet at the same time, seen in the context of France's nineteenth-century Marian apparitions, and the tourist industry which developed in Brittany at the time, the paintings may be seen as celebrating the factor of piety, as much as denigrating it.

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[1] Renan, E. (1883) La prière sur l'Acropole. p.87-88 (Paris). Quoted in Freches-Thory, C. (1988) "Brittany, 1886-1890." in The Art of Paul Gauguin. National Gallery of Art, Washington/ The Art Institute of Chicago, p.55.

[2] Gibson, R. (1989) A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914. Routledge (London)., p140.

[3] Gibson A Social History of French Catholicism p140.

[4] It was with the Volpini Exhibition that Gauguin first became recognised as a great artist. Despite the fact that Fénéon disliked Gauguin as a man, this did not stop the critic from giving Gauguin's work favourable reviews. Fénéon's review of the Exhibition, which appeared in the *Revue Indépendante* stated that;

The mysterious, hostile, and primitive nature of the works of M. PAUL GAUGUIN, painter and sculptor, isolated them from their surroundings at the impressionist exhibitions of 1880, 1881, 1882 and 1886; many details of execution [in his painting], and the fact that he carved his bas-reliefs in wood and coloured them showed a distinct tendency towards archaism; the form of his stoneware vases displayed an exotic taste: all characteristics which attain their degree of saturation in his recent canvasses.

Quoted on p.216 of Halperin, J. V. (1988) Félix Fénéon: Aesthete & Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris. Yale University Press (New Haven).

Aurier also gave favourable reviews to the Volpini Exhibition. He noted the trend of synthetism that was developing, at least in the work of some of the exhibitors, in the sketching, composition, and colour, in the work of Gauguin, Bernard and Anquetin.

Freches-Thory The Art of Paul Gauguin., p.53.

He contrasted this favourably with the cleverness and trickery that he thought was prevalent in the modern era. Albert Aurier and the other symbolist writers of the *Mercure de France*, encouraged Gauguin in his assertions that deliberate distortions in his work revealed his art to be more than mere imitation of nature. Rather, he maintained, his work revealed an intuitive

knowledge of the inner reality of what he was painting. Symbolist painting therefore, by being subjective and decorative, became enigmatic, spiritual, mysterious and suggestive.

Halperin, Félix Fénéon., p.223.

[5] In the autumn of 1888 Gauguin had started to despair of ever achieving his ambition of living in one of France's overseas colonies. In a letter to Vincent van Gogh he wrote;

Therefore I'm sad to be detained at Pont-Aven; as each day goes by, my journey becomes less likely to take place. An artist's life is true martyrdom! and perhaps that keeps us going. Passion invigorates and we die when it's no longer sustained. Oh! to leave these pathways full of thorns - they have for their wild poetry.

Letter to Vincent van Gogh (Pont-Aven 7/9 September 1888) Merlhès, V. [ed.] (1984) Correspondence de Paul Gauguin, 1873-1888. Editions Signac (Paris).

In 1891, largely for financial reasons, but also because of his unfortunate habit of alienating his friends, (for instance by sleeping with the wife of his friend Émile Schuffenecker) Gauguin realised his plan, by spending the majority of the rest of his life in Tahiti. When Gauguin briefly returned to France in 1894, he stayed for three months at Le Pouldu and Pont-Aven, but did not paint any more major Breton works. He returned to Tahiti in 1895, where, following one attempt to poison himself, and three months incarceration, he died in 1903. p.119 Cogniat, R. (1963) Gauguin. Harry N. Abrams (New York).

[6] In 1889, Gauguin stayed at Le Pouldu, a fishing village a short distance from Pont-Aven, during which he did little painting. Of this period of inactivity, Gauguin wrote to Bernard "Right now I am letting all my artistic intelligence lie fallow and I doze, I am not...disposed to understand anything.", Letter to Émile Bernard (June 1890, Le Pouldu); from Guérin, D. [ed.] (1978) The Writings of a Savage: Paul Gauguin. The Viking Press (New York).

After this brief stay at Le Pouldu, Gauguin once more returned to Pont-Aven, where the School reformed itself around him. It was during this time that he painted some of the major works of his Breton period, amongst them *Yellow Christ* and *Green Christ*. It was also during this time that he and his friends organised a showing at the Café Volpini in Paris, designed to coincide with the

Exposition Universelle. Under the banner of synthetism, he exhibited alongside Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, Charles Laval, Émile Schuffenecker, Louis Roy, Léon Fouché, Georges Daniel. and Ludovic Némo (a pseudonym for Bernard). p.68 Thomson, B. (1983) The Post-Impressionists. Phaidon (London).

[7] Maurice Denis wrote about *Green Christ*, in the article *A Definition of Neo-Traditionism*;

Our....impression of moral order opposite the Calvary....cannot spring from the motif or motifs of nature represented, but from the representation itself, forms and colouring....

A Byzantine Christ is a symbol; the Jesus of modern painters, though he wear the most authentic turban, is merely literary. In the one it is the form which is expressive; in the other, it is the imitation of nature which tries to be so....

Maurice Denis, August 1890 "A Definition of Neo-Traditionalism." Art et critique., quoted in Nochlin, L. (1966) Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874-1904. Prentice Hall (London).

[8] The 1854 papal definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary gave official sanction to this increasing devotion to Mary. Ravitch, N. (1990) The Catholic Church and the French Nation: 1589-1989. Routledge (London), p.82-83.

[9] The first of these is said to have occurred to Sister Cathérine Labouré, in Paris in 1830, but the Virgin Mary mainly deigned to appear before a rural audience. The most famous example of this were the series of apparitions which were said to have occurred before Bernadette Soubirous, at Lourdes in 1858. The 1870s marked the high point of such visions, with nine reported, followed by a further five in the 1880s. Gibson, A Social History of French Catholicism., p.147.

[10] Gibson, A Social History of French Catholicism., p.120.

[11] Thomson, B. (1987) Gauguin. Thames & Hudson (London), p.69

[12]The vision is separated from reality, in *Vision After The Sermon*, by the design of dividing the canvas diagonally with the branch of an apple tree. Gauguin wrote this letter to van Gogh, in which he described *Vision After The Sermon*, and explained what he was trying to achieve by painting it;

I think I have achieved great simplicity in the figures, very rustic, very superstitious-the overall effect is very severe-the cow under the tree is tiny in comparison with reality, and is rearing up-for me in this painting the landscape and the fight only exist in the imagination of the people praying after the sermon, which is why there is a contrast between the people, who are natural, and the struggle going on in a landscape which is unnatural and out of proportion.

Letter to Vincent van Gogh (Pont-Aven 25-27th September 1888); in Merlhès, Correspondence de Paul Gauguin.

[13] *I've just finished a religious painting-very badly done but it was interesting to do and I like it. I wanted to give it to the church at Pont-Aven- of course, they don't want it. Breton women in a group, praying: very intense black clothes-yellow-white bonnets, very luminous. The two bonnets at right are like monstrous helmets-an apple tree, which is dark violet, spreads across the canvas: the foliage is defined in masses, like greenish emerald clouds, with greenish yellow interstices of sunlight. the ground is pure vermilion. At the church it tones down and becomes a reddish brown.*

The Angel is dressed in violent ultramarine blue, and Jacob in bottle green. The wings of the Angel are pure number 1 chrome yellow. The Angel's hair is number 2 chrome, and the feet are flesh orange

Letter to Vincent van Gogh (Pont-Aven 25-27th September 1888); in Merlhès, Correspondence de Paul Gauguin.

[14] Pissarro was formerly Gauguin's friend and mentor, but the relationship between the two became somewhat strained when Pissarro adopted the pointillist style championed by Seurat, with whom Gauguin was far from friendly. In painting the modern and mundane aspects of urban life, the pointillists may be seen as representing the image of modernised, metropolitan France. Hoog, M. (1987) Paul Gauguin: Life and Work. Rizzoli (New York), p.80.

[15] M. Launay Le Diocése de Nantes vol.2, p.522, quoted in Gibson A Social History of French Catholicism, p.95. The view that the peasantry were a repository of faith and piety was supported by a Justice of the Peace in the diocese of Besançon in 1857;

The agricultural areas are essentially moral and religious. The man who owes his fortune to the marvellous workings of machines, whose mind is constantly turned towards material things, more easily forgets his origin; the man of the fields cannot forget his creator; in his distress, when the weather is bad or his harvest threatened, he prays to Heaven for help....The worker in a factory only sees the action of matter, the agricultural worker relates everything to the action of a divinity.

Quoted in Gibson A Social History of French Catholicism p.225.

[16] The conflicting views held by the bourgeois have been characterised as splitting the class into 'two races d'hommes,' those of Notre Dame, retrogressive Christian Legitimists, and those of the Eiffel Tower, anticlerical Republican idealists. From de Vogue's "Remarques sur l'exposition du centenaire.", written in 1889. Quoted in p.179 Rabinow, P. (1989) French Modern. M.I.T. Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts).

The Third Republic, which initially under Ferry showed hostility towards the Catholic Church, showed rather greater tolerance of Catholicism around the time of the Boulangist crisis of 1888-9. On this see Chapman, G. (1962) The Third Republic of France: The First Phase 1871-1894. Macmillan & Co. Ltd. (London), p.304.

In order to get support behind a regime that was looking increasingly fragile, in the light of a series of political crises, the Third Republic sponsored a French patriotism that had Catholicism at its core. This uneasy alliance was maintained until the Dreyfus Affair came to a head, towards the end of the century.

For a good general account of this, see Magraw, R. (1983) France 1815-1914: The Bourgeois Century. Fontana (London), p.262-267.

[17] G. Cholvy Religion et société. quoted in Gibson A Social History of French Catholicism, p.98. The introduction of urban influences to the countryside were thus viewed with some dread by the Catholic Church. A curé based near Nantes wrote of the increasing number of mettled roads that were being constructed in his parish;

Goodbye to the calm and solid religious practice that one saw before all these roads. We have six of them that cross the parish, and the devil knows it well.

The introduction of such urban influences were seldom viewed in a positive manner. An idealised past of an ideal agrarian society was often invoked as having been destroyed by such influences. The *Semaine religieuse* of Montpellier in 1877, summed up such sentiments;

The times are bad...in past times, everyone stayed at home....in past times, the family was a little world where there was room, work, and pleasures for all...in past times, life was calmer, the demands of society less absolute....in past times, each province had its costume, varied, but simple and modest....today the country girl knows and wears the exaggerated fashions of the town....in past times, there were as many languages as costumes....it was a barrier against undesirable change...In past times, the priest was held in great respect in the countryside....the family was the vestibule of the church....in past times no one read pernicious books in the countryside....in past times there was more joy, more gaiety, you could hear singing everywhere....in past times, there was dancing only on the day of the local festival, today Sunday is no longer the Lord's day but the day of the bal in past times....there was neither café nor billiard-hall...there weren't any newspapers.

[18] p.134 of Hélias, P.-J. (1975) The Horse of Pride. Yale University Press (New Haven). White may be taken to signify Royalist, Bourbonist and Legitimist.

[19] p.7 of Hélias, The Horse of Pride.

[20] p.176 of Gibson, A Social History of French Catholicism.

The Bretons believed in a neo-pagan death cult, which was dressed in Catholic garb for respectability, a cult which was personified as;

the Ankou, a skeleton with a scythe - Death itself, the harvester of bodies. Everyone preferred to call it 'Him', and this 'Him' was always, sooner or later, the victor.

p.100 of Hélias The Horse of Pride.

[21] Note jotted on the back of a calling card that Gauguin left with the critic Albert Aurier, about Breton Calvary, from Malingue, M. [ed.] (1948) Paul Gauguin: Letters to his Wife and Friends. Saturn Press (London).

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[22] p.346 of Weber, E. (1977) Peasants Into Frenchmen. Chatto & Windus (London).

One of the factors that led to Gauguin's resentment of the Catholic Church was its immense wealth;

What better argument can there be against this Church than the display of all this wealth and this almost unequalled power in the hands of a single man, clothed by himself with the mantle of infallibility?

Gauguin, P. (1952) Intimate Journals. translated by Van Wyck Brooks, preface by Emile Gauguin. William Heinemann Ltd. (London)., p.88.

[23] Gauguin Intimate Journals., p.3.

[24] Gauguin goes on to say:

In contrast with this, if we reflect on what has preceded, we can only conclude that this Church attempts, with a complete denial of these precepts, to invoke them, on the one hand, and on the other to avow the necessity of the Artifice of a strong hierarchy in order to keep the peoples stable.

Gauguin, P. (1952) Intimate Journals., p.90.

[25] p.70 in Bowness, A. (1971) Gauguin. Phaidon (London).

[26] Quoted in 1891 from p.156 of The Art of Paul Gauguin

[27] J. Michelet (1862) Le Prètre, la femme et la famille., quoted in Gibson A Social History of French Catholicism p.187.

Michelet went on;

Never will she pass before this man without lowering her eyes....How humiliating it is to obtain nothing of what used to be yours except with authorization and by indulgence, to be watched and

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followed in the most intimate moments by an invisible observer who controls you and determines your due....to meet in the street a man who knows your secret weaknesses better than you do yourself, who greets you humbly, turns aside, and laughs.

[28] *Yellow Christ* was probably painted in September 1889, just before Gauguin moved to Le Pouldu, a small fishing village near Pont-Aven the following month. The painting was completed, however, after Gauguin's move, and there are traces of newsprint on the canvas, which would seem to indicate that the canvas was transported whilst it was still wet. The Art of Paul Gauguin, p.157.

[29] Nochlin, L. (1983) "The Imaginary Orient." Art in America. 17 pp.119-191, p.127.

[30] Gauguin was still seeking to develop his own style during his time in Brittany. According to the painter Delavallée, a confident of Gauguin's, the focal point of discussion at Marie-Jeanne Gloanec's inn, throughout 1888, was the synthetic style.

Freches-Thory The Art of Paul Gauguin., p.53.

Gauguin had been obsessed with the definition, and the use of this style for some time, but it was in Brittany that the plastic techniques of synthesis were born, the result of the meeting of Gauguin with Bernard. Bernard was able to articulate the theories of synthetism that Gauguin was already using. Gauguin and Bernard adopted a consciously simplified draughtsmanship, and divided all colour fields by a sòlid blue band. Colours were applied zonally, not to create light effects, but to contrast with each other.

Gauguin stressed the importance of colour, over accurate draughtsmanship, writing

I have never known how to make what they call a proper drawing-or a bonnet, or a roll of bread. It always seems to me that there is something lacking-Colour.

Gauguin Intimate Journals. p.43.

This illustrates his contempt for the academic teaching of art which he felt stifled any spontaneity or originality that a student might have;

Some advice-don't try to copy nature too much. Art is an abstract idea - take it from nature which makes you dream and think more of the creation than the result. The only way to feel at one with God is by acting like our divine master - and creating.

To Émile Schuffenecker, (Quimperlé Tuesday 14th August 1888), in Merhlès, Correspondence de Paul Gauguin.

Gauguin's interest in the stylistic development of his painting continued with his later works. This may be illustrated by a passage from some notes that he wrote for his daughter, whilst he was in Tahiti;

...It is said that God took a little clay in his hands and made every known thing. An artist, in turn (if he really wants to produce a divine creative work), must not copy nature but take the natural elements and create a new element.

Cahier pour Aline (1892) in; Guérin The Writings of a savage.

[31] according to Daniel de Monfreid, an art dealer and Gauguin's friend.

p.43 Cogniat, Gauguin.

[32] Gibson A Social History of French Catholicism p.91.

[33] This may be seen in the reliance of Post-Impressionism on the use of Catholic iconography, or the use of an explanatory title, which were especially needed in the case of Symbolist paintings. It is interesting to note that, although colour was divorced from descriptive function, in Post-Impressionism, no symbolic colour system was evolved to explain such use. p.31 Nochlin Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

[34] *In the twentieth century, the Catholic Church is a rich church that has seized upon all the philosophical texts in order to distort them, and Hell prevails. The Word remains.*

Nothing of this Word is dead. The Vedas, Brahma, Buddha, Moses, Israel, Greek philosophy, Confucius, the Gospel, all exist.

Gauguin Intimate Journals, p.93

[35] Gauguin used several Japanese motifs, notably the Japanese print which was incorporated in his *Portrait of the Schuffenecker Family*, and, it is believed by many art historians, that the figures of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, contained in *Vision After The Sermon*, are derived from Hokusai's *Mangura*. Roskill, M., (1970) van Gogh, Gauguin and the Impressionist Circle. Thames and Hudson (London), p.79.

Gauguin testified to the Japanese influence, in the development of Post-Impressionism that he was responsible for, in a letter to Bernard;

As for the explanation of the light, yes. Look at the Japanese who paint admirably and you'll see outdoor life in the sunshine and without shadows. Only using colour as a combination of tone and diverse harmonies, giving the impression of heat etc. Besides, I consider Impressionism to be a totally new research, divorcing itself quite categorically from all that is mechanical, such as photography etc., consequently, I'll distance myself as much as possible from things illusory and, as the shade is the trompe l'œil of the sun, I'm forced to suppress it. If, however, the shade is a necessary form in your creation, that's another matter completely. So, instead of a figure, you paint just a silhouette of a person - it's an interesting starting point, whose strangeness has been carefully calculated.

To Émile Bernard (Arles end of October/beginning of November 1888), from Merhlès Correspondence de Paul Gauguin.

[36] p.163 of National Gallery of Art The Art of Paul Gauguin

[37] The Art of Paul Gauguin, p.163.

[38] p.99, The Art of Paul Gauguin.

[39] Letter to Émile Schuffenecker (Pont-Aven, Sunday 8 July 1888), from Merhlès Correspondence de Paul Gauguin.

Gauguin was born on the 7th June 1848. When his father's radical journalism, led to the family falling out of favour with the Second Republic in 1849, the family travelled to voluntary exile in

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Peru. Although his father died during the voyage, the family lived in Lima for six years, before returning to France. At the age of seventeen, Gauguin engaged as a pilot's apprentice aboard the Luzitano. After leaving the Navy at the end of the Franco-Prussian war, Gauguin began work as a broker for M.Bertin, and shortly afterwards, in 1873, he married Mette-Sophie Gad, a Lutheran Dane. p.17 Cogniat Gauguin.

[40] It is Gauguin's first painting on a religious theme, and marks his break with Impressionism, and the development of his use of full blown synthetism. The subject matter of the painting is derived from a passage in Genesis, which was illustrated by Eugène Delacroix in a mural which he executed for the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris in 1861. It was also the subject of a painting by Gustave Moreau.

The painting saw Gauguin introduce the new principles of Cloissionism ,which involved the division of the picture plane into areas of single colour, demarcated by outlines of bold blue, and Synthetism, which involved the choice of unmodulated colours, and the simplification of objects into arabesques.

Leymarie, J. (1960) Paul Gauguin: Water colours, pastels and drawings in colour. Faber & Faber (London), p.11.

Gauguin, for his part, recognised that *Vision After The Sermon* was a departure from his normal work, as he wrote to his friend Schuffenecker;

This year I have sacrificed everything-execution, colour-for style, because I wished to force myself into doing something other than what I know how to do.

Letter to Émile Schuffenecker (Pont-Aven, 8th October 1888), from Merhlès Correspondence de Paul Gauguin.

[41] Aurier continued;

They have the respectful poses and wide-eyed expressions of simple creatures listening to extraordinary tales being affirmed by some revered, incontestable source. They could be in church, so silent is their gaze, so devout their posture: without doubt, in church, a vague odour of incense and prayer flutters about the white wings of their headdresses and the venerated voice

of the old priest hovers over their heads....Yes, without a doubt, in church, a poor church in some poor little Breton village....But then, where are the mouldy pillars? Where are the milky walls with the tiny, chromolithographic Way of the Cross? Where is the pine pulpit? Where is the old parish priest whose droning voice we can surely hear, raised in sermon? Where is all that? And why the rising of that fabulous hill so far, far away, whose ground looks like gleaming vermilion? Ah! It is because the mouldy pillars, the milky walls, the little chromolithographic Way of the Cross, the pine pulpit and the old priest preaching have for some time now been annihilated-they no longer exist but for the eyes and souls of these good Breton peasant women....All these surrounding objects have dissipated into the vapours, disappeared: even the storyteller himself has disappeared, leaving only his Voice....to contemplate, with such naïve and devoted attention, these peasants with their white headdresses; and it is that Voice, that provincially fantastic vision that rises up over there, far, far away.

Aurier, A. (1891) Mercure de France. Vol.2 p.165, quoted in Hoog Paul Gauguin, p.81.

[42] p.96 Thomson Gauguin.

[43] Denvir, B. (1992) Post-Impressionism. Thames and Hudson (London)., p.96.

[44] Quoted from p.42 Nochlin, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

Towards the end of the 1880s, and inspired by his voyage to Martinique, and his visit to the Exhibition Universalle, Gauguin began to plan a studio in the tropics. He thought that the light there would be better suited to his work, and was rather tired of European life anyway;

The West is rotten today and any Hercules can, like any Antaeus, draw new strength from the ground in that part of the world [the Far East].

Letter to Émile Bernard (August 1890, Le Pouldu); from Guérin, The Writings of a savage.

[45] This is a fair description of the Symbolist art form that Gauguin developed, in conjunction with Émile Bernard, in Brittany in 1888. Gauguin, and many of the painters of the Pont-Aven School, made use of symbolism and religious imagery, which as a device of academic tradition, had been rejected in favour of the painting of the modern and mundane, by most of the Impressionists. The

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use of such devices was largely to facilitate the development of the Symbolist style, which much more so than Impressionism, can be characterised as modernist.

From p.62 of Denvir Post-Impressionism.

[46] Said, E.W. (1978) Orientalism. Penguin Books (London), p.3.

Conclusion

I was brought up by people who looked on history as teaching, whereas it is all an open question; I have never seen two conclusions about it that agreed.

Paul Gauguin, 1901[1]

The paintings that have been considered in this study were all consciously painted within the confines of certain stylistic conventions. The earlier paintings of Gauguin's, that were considered, namely *The Breton Shepherdess*, *Hilly Landscape With Two Figures*, *Four Breton Women*, and *Breton Girls Dancing* were painted in an Impressionist style. As such, these canvasses tend to be landscapes, or representations of figures that are posed as if drawn from nature. Although Gauguin is known to have sketched elements for these paintings from nature, before constructing the final composition in his studio, these particular works all have a naturalistic treatment that suits the subject matter chosen.

All of the other paintings that were considered, Sérusier's *Landscape in the Bois d'Amour (The Talisman)*, and *Solitude*, Bernard's *Breton Women in a Meadow*, and *The Buckwheat Harvest*, and Gauguin's *The Seaweed Gatherers*, *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, *Yellow Christ*, and *Breton Calvary (Green Christ)* may all be said to have been painted in styles that reflect the discussion and development by the Pont-Aven School, during the summer of 1888, and beyond, of a synthetist, symbolist mode of painting known as cloissionism. Whilst many of these paintings reflect a symbolic, and more abstract treatment of similar subjects as Gauguin's Impressionist works, the last three works mark a change of subject to suit a more symbolic style. The choice of subject, in the paintings produced by the Pont-Aven School, was therefore partly determined by stylistic considerations, and not wholly determined by a desire to represent Brittany.

The Pont-Aven School represented certain aspects of Brittany, its landscape, its peasantry, and its Catholicism. This study has argued how each of these aspects was felt by urban, bourgeois, and intellectual French society, to be unique. In this sense, the representations produced by the Pont-Aven School may be seen as a reflection of this hegemonic view of the province. In another sense, the canvasses considered may be seen as being part of a generic body of representation. They are all painted in genres, landscape, representation of peasants, and representation of religious themes, which were popular in France during the nineteenth-century. A final way in which the paintings may be considered is as a reflection of the individual artists' personality, ideas, and current point of stylistic development. As Gauguin said;

> *For anyone who knows how to look, a work of art is a mirror that reflects the artist's mood.*[2]

The fact that Brittany held a place in the popular imagination meant that there would be a market for representations made of the province, and that it would be within the contemplation of artists to produce such representations. The fact that the representations produced formed part of existing genres meant that they would find existing markets and audiences, to which they could be presented. The Pont-Aven School's representations marked a distinct stylistic development, and this meant that they could satisfy the demands of critics and a market which favoured innovation. This is evident from the way that, in turn, Neoclassical, Romantic, Realist, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist paintings eventually found their niche in the nineteenth-century French art market. The search for the novel, or the exotic by the nineteenth-century French art market, which the representations produced by the Pont-Aven School initially represented, may be seen in the interest that was displayed in Japanese art in the second half of the century.

With the exception of *The Talisman*, all of the paintings that have been considered had elements that were sketched from nature, and which were then brought together in the studio, to form a composition. The representations do not therefore constitute observations from nature. The imposition of a synthetist style, and the artifice of the composition of the paintings, meant that the process of constructing these representations marked the taking of conscious intellectual positions, on the part of the artist. It is therefore probably appropriate to place these representations in the context of the intellectual debates over the metropolitan France's perceptions of Brittany.

The Pont-Aven School's choice of subject reflected the Brittany that was offered for consumption by the tourist; that is a wild and isolated Celtic landscape, peopled by a quaintly dressed and placid peasantry, who were constantly engaged in superstitious, yet picturesque religious rituals, and other forms of festivity. The tourist market for which this image was presented was one composed of the urban bourgeoisie, the same audience for whom the Pont-Aven School was producing its paintings. The members of the Pont-Aven School may be seen as both tourists, and producing art for a market created by tourism. As such it is debatable whether the members of the Pont-Aven School gained any genuine insight into the nature of Brittany, or its people, as they only spent a few months each year in the province, and visited Brittany over the relatively short period of time of about one decade.

This contrasts with the members of the Barbizon School, who would live in the village of that name all year round, for up to fifty years. This group also differs from the Pont-Aven School in that several artists amongst it, notably Courbet, actually came from the peasantry that they were representing, and could therefore be said to have some insight into them. Whatever insight the artists of the Pont-Aven School had was more likely to be derived from the stereotypes that were perpetuated in urban circles, by education, popular entertainment, and popular prejudice.

The Pont-Aven School, it is argued, used Brittany as an 'Other' by which to define the urban France that both they, and their audience, came from. As such, representations of a rural Breton landscape, may be seen as a device by which urban society communicated itself to itself. The representations of Brittany that the Pont-Aven School produced to define this 'Otherness' fell into the same category as much as those produced by more conventional artists. The difference is shown through the unique costumes and customs of the Breton peasants portrayed, and is also accomplished by the artist concentrating on the festive aspects of their lives. By avoiding painting the routine aspects of the Bretons' lives, the artists of the Pont-Aven School were emphasising a part of the Bretons' lives which were unusual to them, as well as to the urban audience for whom the paintings were intended.

In this study it has been argued that the Pont-Aven Schools' paintings were mainly aimed at an intellectual, bourgeois, metropolitan French audience. The paintings were largely received as an affirmation of existing, and somewhat conservative metropolitan attitudes towards rural France in general, and Brittany particular. As such, the work of the School may be seen to be a means of perpetuating this attitude. This is certainly born out by the writings of the critics Aurier, Fénéon, and Mirbeau, that have been considered in this study. These critics stress the revolutionary style of the paintings produced by the Pont-Aven School, yet when they discuss the subjects of the representations, they use the same conservative stereotypes and images as the Pont-Aven School.

By placing the stereotypes of Breton identity in the visual realm, the Pont-Aven School, along with other artists who represented the province, gave more power to such representations. Timothy Mitchell has analysed European attitudes to the consumption of the visual. He argues that, in modern Europe, from the late nineteenth-century at least, much of everyday life is considered to be an exhibition,

with sight privileged above all other senses. For the non-European, according to Mitchell,

> *everything seemed to be set up as though it were the model or the picture of something, arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere 'signifier of' something further.*[3]

The representations that the Pont-Aven School produced of Brittany may be thought of as forming part of that process. The School's paintings have been argued to be conveying certain values of a metropolitan bourgeois society, for a metropolitan bourgeois society. Although the representations are of Brittany, the form that they take has probably got more to do with the artists' intellectual backgrounds, than they have with where they were painted. As such, it is contended that Breton culture, and society was not recorded in a neutral manner.

Despite having formulated and defined a new style of painting, and a style which allowed great depth of symbolic meaning, the Pont-Aven School either had nothing new to communicate, or chose to retain existing modes of representation of Brittany. Whether this reflects their true interpretation of Brittany, or whether as Pissarro suggests, it had more to do with cynical manipulation of the conservative tastes of the bourgeois art market, is difficult to tell. Although Gauguin's letters convey disdain for the whole process of the art market, they suggest that he recognised its necessity. Manipulation of this market, by the production of images that would appeal to a conservative audience, whilst actually parodying this image is a possibility that would mirror this disdain. Whatever the truth, it is evident that the representations of Brittany, produced by the Pont-Aven School, form part of a tradition of metropolitan France representing the province for its own ends.

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[1] P. Gauguin (1952) Intimate Journals. translated by Van Wyck Brooks, preface by Émile Gauguin. William Heinemann Ltd. (London).,p.118

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[2] Miscellaneous Things (1896-98) in Guérin, D. [ed.] (1978) The Writings of a savage: Paul Gauguin. The Viking Press (New York).

[3] See p.222 of; Mitchell, T. (1989) "The World as Exhibition." Comparative Studies in Social History 31 pp.217-236.

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